SILENCE STUDIES IN THE CINEMA
AND THE CASE OF ABBAS KIAROSTAMI

by

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Abstract

This thesis is an attempt to formulate a systematic framework for ‘silence studies’ in the cinema by defining silence in pragmatic terms and suggesting different forms of filmic silence. As an illustration of my model, I examine the variety of silences in the works of Abbas Kiarostami, a notable figure of Art Cinema. The analytical approach suggested here can further be applied to the works of many other Art Cinema auteurs, and, by extension, to other cinematic modes as well, for a better understanding of the functions, implications, and consequences of various forms of silence in the cinema.

Chapter 1 provides a working and pragmatic description of silence, applicable to both film and other communicative forms of art. Chapter 2 represents a historical study of some of the major writings about silence in the cinema. Chapter 3 introduces, exemplifies, and analyzes the acoustic silences in the films of Kiarostami, including the five categories of complete, partial (uncovered; covered with noise, music, or perspective), character/dialogue, language, and music silences. Chapter 4 introduces the concept of meta-silence and its trans-sensorial perceptions in communication and in arts, and then defines the four categories of the visual, character/image, narrative, and political silences in Kiarostami’s oeuvre. In the conclusion, some of the powers of silence in the cinema of Kiarostami are discussed. The narrative, ethical, philosophical, and aesthetic dimensions of silence in Kiarostami make it possible to define his cinema as one based in, and dependent on, silence.
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Introduction: Art Cinema and the Art of Silence

Picture 1. The Palme d’Or awarded to Abbas Kiarostami’s *Taste of Cherry* (1997) from the 50th Cannes Film Festival, exhibited at the Iranian Museum of Cinema, Tehran (photo taken by Shahnaz Pashaei Nejad)
The Art of Silence

Silence is arguably one of the most neglected aspects of film theory and criticism. This neglect, more than being rooted in the practice of the cinema, is a result of both the evasive nature of silence itself, and the ambiguity about the best suitable academic discourse for studying cinematic silence. Ideally, this thesis will be read as a modest compensation for this academic silence. By choosing a pragmatic approach for understanding the capabilities of silence in communication, and by distinguishing between different forms of silence in the cinema of Abbas Kiarostami, I try to formulate a systematic framework for ‘silence studies’ in the cinema.

For various reasons, including his globally accepted position as an advocate of Art Cinema, Kiarostami is an excellent case study for the purposes of this research. One of the basic contentions of this thesis is that there is a specific mode of film production, exhibition, and reception known as Art Cinema, which does not follow the classical narrative norms, has a peculiar relation with cinematic realism, is both highly based on individual expressivity and universal acknowledgement, and is more driven by characters rather than plots. But the most important of all for our discussion is that, whether acoustically or in its visual and narrative elements (characters’ motivations, causal relation, progression of the main story, or clarity of what is happening in the story or in the frame), Art Cinema provides a particularly focused area for studying film silences.

This last observation is my point of departure. Simply put, it seems that there is a close relation between Art Cinema and silence. However, it seems that the more conventional modes of film either employ silence to a lesser degree or their silences are not easily recognizable. In “Silence
Juxtaposed Against Sound in Contemporary Indian Cinema,” (lecture in 1998, published transcription in 2003), Shoma Chatterji argues that due to the powerful escapist nature of filmgoing in India, and the heightened senses of people because of the socio-cultural environment, silence is a rarity in Bollywood: “Silence in the narrative structure or in the cinematic space in Indian cinema is almost unknown because (...) nobody would accept it” (109). I do not intend to make any generalization about national cinemas, but considering that Bollywood and Hollywood are two of the most influential prototype-generators of conventional cinema, we can cautiously extend Chatterji’s claim to many other mainstream cinemas, albeit on less immense proportions. Furthermore, as the lack of noise might enhance the possibility of contemplation, there seems to be a direct relation between (film as) art and silence.

Silence, in its various formal and functional incarnations, plays such a significant role in Art Cinema that we might be able to arrive at a modest but constructive suggestion for studying film silences through examining an extreme example of this mode. Preparing the ground for ‘silence studies’ in the cinema, as a new interdisciplinary strategy in analyzing films, is in fact the biggest ambition of this thesis. And it is my hope that through the various categorizations and the pragmatic methodology introduced here, approaching this goal becomes more feasible. Furthermore, what seems to be rewarding in this method is the opportunity for mixing the traditional paths of film studies (auteur theory, theory of genre, formalism and structuralism in textual analysis, etc.) with some inter-subjective and inter-textual, yet indefinite and flexible, sets of criteria for distinguishing the works of ‘art’ from the other subjects of social, psychological, and philosophical studies, and from the commodities aiming at a consumer target group. Maybe the significance of this thesis can be summarized in these precious words
of Susan Sontag that, “ Silence is a strategy for the trans-valuation of art, art itself being the herald of an anticipated radical trans-valuation of human values” (Sontag 18). An analysis of the abundant silences in Art Cinema will hopefully be applicable to other cinematic modes. But what exactly is this Art Cinema, and how can we locate Kiarostami in it?

**Art Cinema**

*I never apologize for combining the word ‘art’ with the word ‘cinema’.*

Dudley Andrew (D. Andrew v)

In *Paris-Tehran*, Maziar Eslami (an Iranian film scholar) and Morad Farhadpour (one of the most influential Iranian philosophers of the past decade), criticize those proponents of Kiarostami who attribute a “local,” “national,” or “alternative” quality to his cinema. In their post-colonial and assertively ideological reading, they see the whole concept of “alternative cinema” as a “reaction to Hollywood which is not that much different from Hollywood itself in terms of its universal spread, repetitiveness, and becoming cliché,” and thus, conclude that, what is being seen from a Western eye is in fact “in continuation of the Hollywood hegemony” (13-14). However, such attacks on the idea of a counter-mainstream cinema (‘a resistance front against Hollywood’, as Godard might put it) inherently prove its existence at a critical level: it might be what the mainstream allows to *be* for its pressure-release safety, but it also has to *be*, to *exist*, to be read as such.
What seems to be neglected from the disapproving comments of these Kiarostami compatriots is that they confuse the reception of Art film with what this mode of cinema structurally presents. This confusion has not necessarily been the case among the film critics, even if they had some reservations about what we consider today as Art Cinema. For example, as early as 1961, Pauline Kael ridicules the admiring responses of “educated” cinephiles towards “art” films as being pretentious and shallow. In fact, studying Kael’s writings on what she claims to not understand (Alain Resnais’ 1959 *Hiroshima mon Amour*) or “detest” (the three “lumpy” movies of 1961: Michelangelo Antonioni’s *La Notte*, Alain Resnais’ *Last Year at Marienbad*, and Federico Fellini’s *La Dolce Vita*), proves the existence of a cycle at the time, and even can contribute to our own discussion. A very good example of this sort is her disdain for the dialogue repetition and also the silence in *Hiroshima mon Amour*: “The Japanese, it may be noted, is rather dull and uninteresting: he says no more than an analyst might; he is simply a sounding board” (33-34).

Historically, Art films, and the consideration of film as art, go back to the early days of the cinema. The French *Film d’Art* of the 1910s and various experimental and avant-garde movements of the 1920s in Germany and France are some well-known examples among cineastes, and the writings of Arnheim (but also Balázs and Eisenstein, as we will see in chapter 2) were some of the first serious attempts to give film an artistic eminence. But the first theoretical attempts to categorize and theorize Art Cinema as “a distinct branch of cinematic institution” (Bordwell, *Art Cinema* 94) started in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and in the works of such scholars as David Bordwell and Steve Neale. In his 1979 essay, “The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice,” Bordwell argues that “we can usefully consider the ‘art cinema’ as a
distinct mode of film practice, possessing a definite historical existence, a set of formal
covenants, and implicit viewing procedure” (94). Bordwell lists realism, authorial expressivity,
and ambiguity as some characteristics of this trend (Bordwell, Art Cinema 94-99). Two years
later, in an essay titled “Art Cinema as Institution,” Neale added that, “Art films tend to be
marked by a stress on visual style (...), by a suppression of action in the Hollywood sense, by a
consequent stress on character rather than plot and by an interiorization of dramatic conflict”
(103-104). But the most radical classification was done by William C. Siska, first in his
Modernism in the Narrative Cinema: The Art Film as a Genre (1980), and then in an article titled
“The Art Film” (included as the last chapter of Wes D. Gehring’s edited Handbook of American
Film Genres, published in 1988). In this essay, Siska describes the possibility of studying Art film
as a genre, relying mainly on the repeated motifs and characteristics of the peaks of the genre
in the 1950s (works of Bergman, Resnais, Antonioni, and Fellini) to render a generic pattern for
this kind of cinema.

Furthermore, to confirm a part of my previous paraphrasing from Eslami and Farhadpour, it
should be noted that despite the deep national roots of many film auteurs (e.g. Greek Theo
Angelopoulos, Hungarian Béla Tarr, Romanian Cristian Mungiu) Art Cinema seems to be by
nature a more globalized phenomenon. Although by itself art is a vague and elusive term
subject to different definitions in different disciplines and in different times, there seems to be
a general consensus over what can be considered as ‘Art film’ all around the world. In his
foreword to a recent collection of essays titled Global Art Cinema (2010), the notable Dudley
Andrew asserts that Art film is “by definition pan-national, following the urge of every
ambitious film to take off from its point of release, so as to encounter other viewers, and other
movies, elsewhere and later” (D. Andrew vi). Steve Neale too suggests that Art Cinema “in its cultural and aesthetic aspirations, relies heavily upon an appeal to the ‘universal’ values of culture and art” (Neale 118). This universality to a great extent is the result of the canonization of Art Cinema by film critics, film studies departments around the world, and international film festivals. As we will see in chapters 3 and 4, finding a filmmaker more associated with these criteria than Kiarostami is difficult. I hope that the results of analyzing the many kinds of silences that Kiarostami employs in his cinema can reach beyond to other representations of Art Cinema, and finally, to film in general.

**Silence Studies in Practice: The Structure of the Thesis**

The first step in studying silence should of course be formulating a precise meaning and significance of silence itself. Rather than coming up with a conclusive definition, chapter 1 tries to provide a working and pragmatic description of silence, applicable to both film and other communicative forms of art. After some necessary observations about the place of silence in language and culture, and also a discussion on the possibility or refusal of having absolute or independent silence, there is a fairly extensive review of the existing literature on silence in linguistics. Five significant and pragmatic conclusions from this forty year old history are itemized by the end of the chapter. The common ground of these conclusions is that rather than a solid entity with a single definition, silence is a plural, pragmatic, and relative concept that should be studied through its specific applications and functions in each context. Acting as
a frame of reference, the conclusions of this chapter will justify the methodologies used in
chapters 3 and 4.

Repositioning the literature review within the field of film studies, chapter 2 represents a
historical study of some of the major writings about silence in the cinema. The history of
studying silence in the cinema has mostly been a history of studying voices, sounds, music, or
noises. Most of the writings in this field have brought up a relational concept of silence through
a process of displacement. In other words, the absence or rarity of sounds, rather than the
presence of the silence, has been the main subject of these studies. Also, in this chapter, two of
the main discourses relevant to silence studies in the cinema are discussed through references
to Michel Chion (acoustics and film sound) and Jean-Luc Nancy (philosophy and
phenomenology), and then two examples of ‘silence studies in practice’ are examined: Tarja
Laine’s analysis of an Art film (The Silence) and Lisa Coulthard’s study of an Art filmmaker
(Michael Haneke) are promising examples of the recent cinematic approaches to silence
studies.

Both chapters 3 and 4 begin with a set of reasons for choosing Kiarostami as my main case
study. Not only as a key figure in Art Cinema, but also as a photographer, poet, and connoisseur
of philosophy of art, Kiarostami has always emphasized the creative uses of silence. In line with
the previous studies on cinematic silence, chapter 3 studies the various forms of acoustic
silences in Kiarostami. Five categories of complete silence, partial silences (uncovered; covered
with noise, music, or perspective), character/dialogue silence, language silence, and music
silence are introduced, exemplified, and analyzed in Kiarostami’s works. In the end, I suggest
the possibility of using these categories for a quantitative analysis of certain films, through the example of *Taste of Cherry* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1997).

Chapter 4 addresses a metaphorical and trans-sensorial perception of silence in communication and arts. Introducing the concept of ‘meta-silence’, I use the example of Kiarostami’s photos and poems to show some non-acoustic applications of silence. Furthermore, to test whether silence can in fact be regarded as the ground that connects all phases of Kiarostami’s filmmaking, I detect a certain “authorial silence” in the trajectory of his cinema in his own words. The four categories of *visual*, *character/image*, *narrative*, and *political* silences are then defined and mapped in the works of Kiarostami. In the end, all the nine categories of silences introduced in this research are studied through analyzing *Shirin* (Abbas Kiarostami, 2008), an example *par excellence* of the close relation between silence and Art Cinema.

In the conclusion, some of the powers of silence in the cinema of Kiarostami are discussed. Following the arguments in the previous chapter, I maintain that narrative silence empowers the audience by turning the film into an inter-active and participatory medium. This regime of silence is a democracy forced onto the audio-viewer, with a transcendental effect. Furthermore, as a self-reflexive and philosophically charged device, silence becomes a ground for contemplation and a fundamental element in the poetic structure of Kiarostami’s films. The narrative, ethical, philosophical, and aesthetic dimensions of silence in Kiarostami make it possible to define his cinema as one based and dependent on silence. Arguably, these categories and conclusions are not limited only to this case study, and can be extended to other figures of Art Cinema, and to other cinematic modes too. The model proposed here, however,
can be used as a pragmatic approach to studying the various forms and functions of different silences in the cinema.

* * *

There seems to be a subtle relation between silence and poetry, some aspects of which will be discussed in this thesis. And there is also a poetic feeling to the way that silence passes between the imaginary world of a film and the real lives of the audience. I would like to finish this brief introduction with an excerpt from a poem by the German poet, Margot Bickel, titled “Silence is Full of the Unspoken.” Not only can this be an accurate commencement for the rest of this text, but the multi-layered romantic and political subtexts attached to it in Kiarostami’s home country (mainly because of Ahamad Shamlou’s sonorous reciting of his co-translation of the poem in the 1980s) can best imply what I will try to delve into in the following pages:

“Silence is full of the unspoken / of deeds not performed / of confessions to secret love / and of wonders not expressed / Our truth is hidden in our silence / yours and mine.”
Chapter 1: What We Talk About When We Talk About Silence

Picture 2. An ancient Zoroastrian ‘Tower of Silence’ in Yazd, Iran (Image taken from H., Bijan)
1.1 Towards a Working Definition: Silence Impossible

Establishing a ground for ‘silence studies’ in the cinema, first requires an unequivocal understanding of the term ‘silence’. However, silence in different languages and cultures assumes such a broad range of qualities that finding a peremptory definition of it or an all-inclusive depiction of its various applications and functions is almost impossible. In fact, like many other human concepts, silence may not be circumscribed by a conclusive meta-narrative. Therefore, to know silence, one has to inevitably recognize its diverse manifestations in a variety of inter-linked fields. In other words, maybe even talking about silence in singular form is misleading, and to study silence, one has no option but to break it down.

However, portraying the commonalities of ‘silences’ in general is beyond the scope of this text, and probably too big a project to be encapsulated here. There are, of course, different theories about silence in different discourses, but for the purpose of this research, I will limit my framework to the configurations of silence in pragmatics. The objective of this chapter is to reach an inter-subjective conception of silence with a degree of consensus among the scholars of the field, which can serve us as a frame of reference when applying to film. Also, the methodologies used by the pragmaticians will help me formulate a more systematic approach to cinematic silences. But before that, I shall start with some scientific, cultural, and linguistic data and facts that will act as guidelines for a working definition.

Not only is providing a comprehensive definition of silence difficult, but even the concept itself is not absolute in reality. Early in April 2012, the British Daily Mail published an article about an anechoic chamber at Orfield Laboratories in South Minneapolis, USA (see picture 1). This room,
according to the Guinness Book of Records, is 99.99% sound absorbent, and is called the quietest place on the planet (Thornhill). According to the company’s founder and president, Steven Orfield, the longest anyone could stay in this room had only been 45 minutes. The reason for that is a terrifying fact: the room is so quiet that you can hear your organs working; the heart pumping the blood and the lungs sucking in the air. The experience of hearing one’s own body making music (the ‘high’ nervous system and the ‘low’ blood circulation) is also mentioned by John Cage in an often quoted anecdote about his visit to a similar chamber at Harvard University (“Quotes”). In other words, in the most silent place imaginable on earth, one’s body becomes the sound.

Picture 3. The Orfield anechoic chamber: “Silence is not so golden” (picture and text taken from Thornhill)
Furthermore, this acoustic void has some non-acoustic consequences too. Orfield says, “How you orient yourself is through sounds you hear when you walk. In the anechoic chamber, you don’t have any cues. You take away the perceptual cues that allow you to balance and manoeuvre. If you’re in there for half an hour, you have to be in a chair” (Orfield qtd in Thornhill). Taking this silence, enduring it, accepting and living it is impossible. This is more than just a lack of sounds; this is becoming the sounds, which opens the eyes to one’s entirely physical entity, and inevitably to its finitude. The many associations of silence with death - this ultimate truth - are derived from this self-reflexive nature of silence. Could this be a reason for some of the cultural negativity towards silence? (see picture 2)


But just like death, ‘having’ or ‘owning’ this kind of silence is also impossible. One cannot experience death until one is not alive, and then it is too late to call the death event an experience. Similarly, even in the quietest environment, it is impossible to avoid sounds altogether due to the noisy nature of human beings. The example of anechoic chambers proves
that we cannot ‘have’ total silence, and so does the existing literature on the issue. For example, a pioneer of silence studies in pragmatics, Thomas J. Bruneau, asserts that, “silence does not exist in the physical absolute” (17); the famous aesthete and literary theoretician, Susan Sontag, emphasizes that, “Silence doesn’t exist in a literal sense, however, as the experience of an audience” (9, emphasis in original); and John Cage, the artist of the most famous ‘silent’ work of art, 4’33’’, says the same, from a more experienced point of view: “There is no such thing as silence. Something is always happening that makes a sound” (191). Note that in all these accounts, the reason for denying the existence of silence (in a literal, absolute, or total sense) is the presence of a listener.

This can be explained in the more refined framework of structural linguistics too. Put simply, in any given verbal communication, or any communicative process “capable of being verbalized” (Jakobson, “Closing Statements” 353), all the constituents can be silent at certain moments, but as long as we accept the existence of a communication, silence cannot exist in its totality. In a Jakobsonian model – to which I will shortly return in order to elaborate a pragmatic model of silence studies– even if we delude ourselves that one component of the communication could be totally silent, there remains a factor which is not. In the words of Bruneau (referring to Karen F. Stein’s “Metaphysical Silence in Absurd Drama”), “absolute silence, then, is impossible: even when not speaking aloud, man carries on a continuous interior monologue,” and therefore, silence “appears to be both a concept and an actual process of mind” (17, emphases in original).

But if there is no such thing as silence, how could we measure the quantity of a non-existence? To answer, we should first compromise the question to some degree. Silence exists, but not as
an absolute entity; it is always relational. In addition, measuring its quantity is only one of the ways to gauge this concept. We should first acknowledge that there are two different discourses on sensory silence that are closely connected to each other: one is auditory and the other trans-sensorial. Similarly, as we will shortly see, silence can be studied either acoustically or pragmatically (Sobkowiak 43). This thesis is also based on these two origins: The main focus of this chapter is trying to define silence in terms of its pragmatic dimensions; the acoustic approaches to the cinematic silences will be studied in the next chapter.

1.2 Definitions: Semantics and Etymology

Merriam-Webster online dictionary gives four categories of meaning for silence: 1) muteness: forbearance from speech or noise; 2) stillness: absence of sound or noise; 3) oblivion or obscurity, in the form of absence of mention; and 4) secrecy, again in the form of absence of mention (“Silence” in Merriam-webster.com). Correspondingly, the Iranian dictionary of Dehkhoda gives these two definitions for the Farsi “سکوت” (sokot): 1) darkness [the same word for turning off the lights]; and 2) being able to speak but refraining from it (“سکوت” in loghatnaameh.org). One commonality in all these six definitions in two different cultures is the emphasis put on the ‘intentionality’ of the noun silence or sokout - something that changes a little in the verb form of the word (See Table 1).

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>muteness (forbearance)</th>
<th>stillness</th>
<th>oblivion/obscurity</th>
<th>secrecy</th>
<th>darkness</th>
<th>refraining from speaking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intentional</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unintentional</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. The Intentionality of Silence
Another common aspect in these meanings is that they imply something more than a mere absence of words or even sounds. Trying to clarify the semantic field of silence, Wlodzimierz Sobkowiak suggests: “silence appears to be a linguistically non-autonomous concept par excellence: it is best defined acoustically and/or pragmatically” (43). He then goes on to classify the five definitions of silence in the *Webster Collegiate* into these two rubrics:

1. The state or fact of keeping silent; a refraining from speech or from making noise (pragmatic/acoustic),
2. Absence of any sound or noise; stillness (acoustic),
3. A withholding of knowledge or omission of mention (pragmatic),
4. Failure to communicate, write, keep in touch, etc. (pragmatic),
5. Oblivion or obscurity (pragmatic).

(Sobkowiak 43)

An early conclusion from these findings can be the inter-linked relation of the operational fields of silence. In other words, any acoustic silence is pragmatic too, but only some pragmatic forms of silence (the first and second items from Sobkowiak’s chart) are also acoustic. I will come back later to both the *intentional* and *pragmatic* nature of silence, and use them for my own analysis of the cinema of Abbas Kiarostami. But before moving to more linguistic approaches, let us take a brief but useful look at some roots and connotations of silence in language. According to *Online Etymology Dictionary*, Silence is derived from the Latin “silentium ‘a being silent,’ from silens, [past participle] of silere ‘be quiet or still,’ of unknown origin” (Silence in etymonline.com). It seems that throughout the history, other than the usual association with a
lack of, or a refraining from producing, sounds, silence has also attained a semi-holy status: The old Zoroastrians in ancient Iran had a practical use for their ‘Tower of Silence’ (see the picture on the first page of this chapter): an open-topped tower where they left their dead for both a gradual decay by the weather and a faster annihilation by necrophagous animals (Bahar 486, “Dakhma” in britannica.com). The Quakers have a few minutes to an hour of “holy silence” in their waiting worship for the Holy Spirit to speak through one of the “friends” (“Silence in Quaker Tradition” in hermitary.com). And even more recently, the Roman Catholic Association of Opus Sanctorum Angelorum, founded in 1949, who believe in “Holy Silence” as “the Secret of the Saints” and an inevitable part of spirituality, hold that, “Silence is the fifth of the seven character traits in the Work of the Holy Angels” (“Opus Sanctorum Angelorum” in opusangelorum.org). Once again, silence equals the impossible and the ultimate: death, God, and transcendental metaphysics. This is an association not exclusive to the ancient religions and modern cults, but also prevalent in the contemporary spirituality of the believers. Mother Teresa of Calcutta has been quoted to say:

We need to find God and he cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence. See how nature – trees, flowers, grass – grows in silence; see the stars, the moon and the sun, how they move in silence... we need silence to be able to touch souls.

(Mother Teresa 68-69)

However, as we will see, this intentional, pragmatic, and spiritual status of silence was not recognized in linguistic, literary, and academic discourses until very recently.
1.3 A Pragmatic Overview

1.3.1 Emerging from the Void

While a fascinating side-dish for many writers in philosophy and literature, silence rarely gets the chance to be the main subject of academic analyses. The importance of silence in different modes of thinking, however, has always been confirmed in numerous writings and oral sayings. The abundance of proverbs and famous quotes on silence is of course a good example of this publicly respected position. A Farsi proverb says “silence is a sign of consent”, which is comparable to its Roman counterpart: “qui tacet consentire videtur,” “he who keeps silent is assumed to consent” (sacklunch.net); “Silence is golden” is now international; Cicero is often quoted to say, “Silence is one of the great arts of conversation” (quotationsbook.com); and who doesn’t know the last words of Hamlet in Shakespeare’s bloody masterpiece: “The rest is silence” (Shakespeare 5:2)? In these cultural traditions, silence is treated as though it is rarely just what it is, and always impregnated with mystery and something ‘more.’

In the academy, silence has been more fortunate in psychology and linguistics departments. And film, as a medium of communication and as a form of art, can benefit from both disciplines. As noted earlier, studying the trajectory of treating silence in communication studies and pragmatics can be particularly helpful for our purposes here. And it all starts with rejecting the equation of silence and void. Wittgenstein’s famous quote (in Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus) that, “whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent” has been interpreted both as complementary (Ephratt 1911) and as a sign of equating silence to nothingness (Bruneau 20). The inferior or neglected status of silence in linguistics was changed by the emergence of
pragmatics in the late sixties and early seventies (Mey 19), and also by the works of those influenced by the Prague linguistic circle. Still a young offspring of linguistics, “pragmatics is the science of language seen in relation to its users” (Mey 5), or, to narrow it down a little more, “pragmatics is the study of the conditions of human language uses as these are determined by the context of society” (Mey 42).

Although Sidney J. Baker’s “The Theory of Silences” was published in 1955, and Susan Sontag’s “The Aesthetics of Silence” in 1967 (I will get back to both in this chapter), the pragmatic study of silence got its momentum in 1973, when two of the most influential essays on the issue were published. Both J. Vernon Jensen’s “Communicative Functions of Silence” and Thomas J. Bruneau’s “Communicative Silence: Forms and Functions” were less preoccupied with the linguistic mechanisms and more with what their titles explicitly announce: the functions of silence in communication. Despite their seemingly narrow views, these two essays became cornerstones on which the pragmatics built a modest scholarly work.

Although Jensen sometimes equals silence with the absence of words, or even pauses while speaking, his basic definition of silence is the absence of sound (249). Jensen ascribes five functions to silence, which all can have both positive and negative connotations. As my summarization of these categories in the following diagram shows, the tendency to classify silences, or breaking down silence to its different functions, has been with silence studies from the beginning.
In Bruneau’s formal assessment, silence is also defined by its functions but in different contexts. Therefore, both hesitations and repetitions are considered forms of silence. Based on the perception of time, Bruneau divides the “communicative silence” into three groups: psycholinguistic, interactive, and socio-cultural. I have summarized these categories along with a short description of each in the following diagram.
By introducing silence as a communicative element, and by proposing a functional and contextualized study of its various representations, Bruneau laid a methodological foundation for silence studies. Not only has this taxonomic study been the base for many future studies of this kind – including my own categorization of the cinematic silences in chapters 3 and 4 – but its clever grouping also encompasses some previous studies too. For example, Baker’s “The Theory of Silences,” using a form of speech-rate theory as its methodology (and the very odd case study of a woman who wrote many letters to a newspaper editor over a short period of time on very different issues), studies “the psychological mechanism of the interpersonal relationship” (Baker, 145), but it basically belongs to only the second group of Bruneau’s communicative silences: the interactive group. Another important principle for both Baker and
Bruneau is that they see silence as the background for speech. On the one hand, Bruneau rejects the claims of antagonism or opposition between speech and silence, and on the other hand, he denies their synonymity. He writes,

Silence is to speech as the white of this paper is to this print. Physiologically, silence appears to be the mirror image of the shape of discernible sound for each person. Speech signs, created by necessity or will, appear to be mentally imposed figures on mentally imposed grounds of silence. Mind creates both.

(Bruneau 18)

This is in line with another formal reading of silence (yet in a more interdisciplinary context) by Susan Sontag. In “The Aesthetics of Silence” (written in 1967), Sontag describes the dependent nature of silence as such:

“Silence” never ceases to imply its opposite and to depend on its presence: just as there can’t be “up” without “down” or “left” without “right,” so one must acknowledge a surrounding environment of sound or language in order to recognize silence. Not only does silence exist in a world full of speech and other sounds, but any given silence has its identity as a stretch of time being perforated by sound (... ) The artist who creates silence or emptiness must produce something dialectical: a full void, an enriching emptiness, a resonating or eloquent silence.

(Sontag, 11)

Not only do Bruneau and Sontag manage to define silence by its interdependent relation to an opposite, but they come up with a terminology that is respected by their successors. More than two decades later, Michel Chion (an important figure in popularizing sound studies in film)
wrote that “Silence is never a neutral emptiness. It is the negative of sound we’ve heard beforehand or imagined; it is the product of a contrast” (Chion, Audio-Vision 57).

A year after Jensen and Bruneau’s game-changing contributions to silence studies in pragmatics, Richard L. Johannesen’s “The Functions of Silence” was published, which is, again, an examination of functioning of silence in different contexts. These include the roles of silence in A) “human thought processes and cultural development,” B) “purposive, everyday, interpersonal communication,” C) “political and civic life;” and D) “pathological settings such as counseling and psychotherapy” (25). In the same year, Harvey Sacks, Emanuel A. Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson proposed a model in “A Simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn-Taking for Conversation,” which contained some passing notes about different kinds of silence, including “‘gap’, ‘pause’, and ‘lapse’ as ways of conceiving the appearance of silence in a conversation” (715). In a footnote to this line, they explain that a “pause” is an intra-turn silence by the speaker, a “gap” is silence after a possible completion point, and “lapses” are “extended silences at transition-relevance places,” and that some of these are also transformable to each other (715). It seems that Sacks et al equate “silence” with “intervals” between “the end of a prior and start of a next piece of talk” (731) – although, as we will see later, some theorists consider intervals as yet another category of silence in the same essay.

In the 1980s, silence again became the object of pragmatic interest in Deborah Tannen and Muriel Saville-Troike’s co-edited Perspectives on Silence (1985), still highly influenced by Bruneau’s taxonomy and principles. Saville-Troike’s article (“The Place of Silence in an Integrated Theory of Communication”) re-iterates that silence is not merely the absence of
speech, and Tannen’s essay (titled “Silence: Anything But”) maintains that there is a valuation system (negative silence and positive silence) due to the ambiguous value of silence. More importantly, in the last segment of their introduction (sub-headed as “Forms and Functions of Silence”), Tannen and Saville-Troike make a distinction between small and broad levels of silence, illustrated in my following diagram. The last item – shortened to ‘background silence’ by me – is the broadest level of silence, “which provides the structure and background against which talk is marked and meaningful merely by virtue of its occurrence” (xvii, emphases are mine).

Tannen and Saville-Troike’s Levels of Silence

- Cessation of sounds in the production of consonants
  - Sometimes perceived as hesitation
- Pausing
  - Sometimes not perceived at all
- Filled pauses
- Interactive pauses
  - Silent pauses
- Complete silence of one party to a conversation
- Background silence

Diagram 3: A summary of Tannen and Saville-Troike’s levels of silence (1985)
1.3.2 Jakobson’s Legacy

If up until this point the linguists’ emphasis on acknowledging the forms and functions of silence in verbal communication would indirectly relate them to Roman Jakobson’s legacy of communicative factors and functions, another pragmatic approach to silence suggested by Sobkowiak, the markedness theory, was more directly connected to the binary oppositions proposed by the Prague school of structuralism (i.e. Nikolai Trubetzkoy and Roman Jakobson). So, before moving to the status of silence in markedness theory, a very brief review of Jakobson’s contribution to the discourse might be necessary here.

Whether as a formalist or a structuralist, Jakobson sees binary poles and oppositions in language. This can be seen both in the more complex notions of metaphor-selection/metonymy-combination axes and his two dyads of markedness/unmarkedness and variation/invariance which, to him, define language par excellence. In “Verbal Communications,” he contends:

Every single constituent of any linguistic system is built on an opposition of two logical contradictories: the presence of an attribute ("markedness") in contraposition to its absence ("unmarkedness"). The entire network of language displays a hierarchical arrangement that within each level of the system follows the same dichotomous principle of marked terms superposed on the corresponding unmarked terms.

(Jakobson, “Verbal Communication” 76)

Jakobson’s second and more groundbreaking contribution to pragmatics was his suggestion of six functions for the constitutive factors in any speech act. In “Closing Statements: Linguistics
and Politics” (published in English in 1960), Jakobson schematizes all the factors involved in verbal communication as follows (353):

CONTEXT

ADDRESSER................................MESSAGE........................ADDRESSEE

CONTACT

CODE

Diagram 4: Jakobson’s constituents of communication (1960)

In his own words:

The ADDRESSER sends a MESSAGE to the ADDRESSEE. To be operative the message requires a CONTEXT referred to ("referent" in another, somewhat ambiguous, nomenclature), seizable by the addressee, and either verbal or capable of being verbalized; a CODE fully, or at least partially, common to the addresser and addressee (or in other words, to the encoder and decoder of the message); and, finally, a CONTACT, a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication.

(Jakobson, “Closing Statements” 353)

Jakobson asserts that a set (Einstellung) towards any of these factors, makes their function the dominant function of any utterance or verbal communication (or any communication that can be verbalized), while a combination of these can be at work at any time (Jakobson, “Closing
Statements”, 353). The corresponding scheme of the six functions is as follows (Jakobson, “Closing Statements” 357):

```
+-----------------+-------------+-----------------+
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>REFERENTIAL</th>
<th>METALINGUAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PHATIC</td>
<td>EMOTIVE</td>
<td>(METALINGUISTIC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(EXPRESSIVE)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
+-----------------+-------------+-----------------+
| POETIC           |             |                 |
+-----------------+-------------+-----------------+
```

Of course the actual mechanism of each of these six factors and functions is a lot more complex than any one-line definition can convey. For example, Jakobson argues that “the poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination” (Jakobson, “Closing Statements”, 358), but, at the same time, he notes that, “the linguistic scrutiny of poetry cannot limit itself to the poetic function” (Jakobson, “Closing Statements” 357). As we see in the works of some pragmaticians, applying these functions to different concepts can be a model of analysis - as Sobkowiak does it for his “communicative silence” and Ephratt for her “eloquent silence”. However, due to reasons that will later be introduced, this is not the method used in this thesis. What we can infer from this scheme for our own discussion on silence here is that each of Jakobson’s six factors can contain levels of silence, while the
communication still is at work by other non-silent elements or even the same element at various times. As Cage, Sontag, and Bruneau point out, absolute silence at any given moment in a communicative process is impossible. By the same token, the silence of some of these factors at certain moments is possible. In other words, by combining pragmatic linguistics with a semi-philosophical view of the communication process, one can conclude that both silence and speech (or whatever that is not silence) can be simultaneously at work in any given communication.

1.3.3 Markedness Theory

In the 1990s, Sobkowiak suggested studying silence by the criteria of markedness theory. First applied to phonemes (by Trubetzkoy), and later to morphology and semantics (by Jakobson), this is a theory which seeks to find out the nature of asymmetrical relations between linguistic elements, and extensively, between cultural phenomena. In its most simplistic and reductionist definition, unmarked is the dominant (and henceforth normal) element of the binary, and marked is the less frequent one. However, many more factors should be considered while applying this seemingly straightforward formula to communicative processes. Sobkowiak argues that relativity (X is marked in relation to Y, but unmarked in relation to Z) and non-autonomy (the necessity to use extra-linguistic causes for explaining the markedness of an element) are two pre-conditions of the theory, and its four criteria are content, form, distribution, and function.
Evaluating silence by these criteria, Sobkowiak introduces his notion of *communicative silence*, adopted from Bruneau (1997). Trying to give a definition of communicative silence (CS) that includes both the pragmatic and acoustic aspects of silence, Sobkowiak suggests that CS is a kind of silence “which is deliberately produced for communicative purpose in what is perceived by both parties as a communicative situation” (44). He goes on to argue that due to its communicative deficiencies, CS is “a pragmatically marked member of the opposition silence-speech” (45), which means, according to the quadruple criteria of markedness theory, speech is the primary, dominant, and prevailing pole and therefore unmarked in relation to silence. His main argument for this deficiency is the relatively limited meta-linguistic and referential functions of silence (as the codes of silence are too ambiguous and it is too much context-dependent) (45-46).

Sobkowiak’s argument is undermined by two other distinguished linguists. In another chapter of the same volume where Sobkowiak’s controversial essay was published, Adam Jaworski questions the validity of considering silence as the marked member of the opposition to speech in ethnographic and cross-cultural perspectives, by the possibility of “citing examples of ‘ordinary’ (unmarked) situations which in some cultures do call for silence” (18). Sobkowiak, of course, had predicted such counter-examples and would explain them through the concept of *markedness inversion*: “If CS is indeed marked, as argued (for) here, markedness theory would predict that in the pragmatically marked contexts (rhetorical questions, funerals, face-threatening situations, and the like) CS would be expected due to markedness inversion” (Sobkowiak 56). However, despite Sobkowiak’s claims of defining the marked CS on a pragmatic level (Sobkowiak 45), Jaworski does not see this approach pragmatically suitable. While
admitting the fittingness of the markedness theory for the phonological and grammatical aspects of language, he sees an imposed “deviationist perspective” by this theory, which “favours some modes of language use as more ‘standard’ than others” (Jaworski 18). Jaworski borrows the term, “deviationist perspective” from Richard Bauman. A pioneer in performance studies and linguistic anthropology, Bauman rejects those “deviationist perspectives” that are founded on the notion of a “normal” or “standard” language. In *Verbal Art as Performance* (1977), he stresses,

> The ethnographic perspective employed in this work is fundamentally at odds with the deviationist perspective. It rests instead on a multifunctional view of language use, which recognizes that the members of every speech community have available to them a diversity of linguistic means of speaking, none of which can serve a priori as an analytical frame of reference for any other.

(Bauman 17)

According to Jaworski, by considering the various situations and cultural and ethnographic contexts which cannot be reduced to being the “marked” minority, this extensively pragmatic, completely flexible and more democratic view of language (or communication) is more productive in analysing silence, “even if silence does not perform all communicative functions to the same extent as speech” (19). However, almost a decade later, even this “deficiency” was rejected by another scholar.

Michal Ephratt, in her 2008 essay, “The Functions of Silence,” specifically deals with the same issue and argues that her own version of *eloquent silence* - first coined by Sontag (Sontag, 11) -
does in fact have all the Jakobson’s functions of language. Ephratt puts special emphasis on the referential function of silence, both in speech-acts and in silence as a morphologically meaningful zero sign which is an outcome of choice (1914). Furthermore, mainly through counter examples, she rejects the inferiority of silence to speech in metalinguistic grounds.

Overall, it seems that in some confined discourses the markedness theory could be valuable in studying silence, but considering the pragmatic and functional co-relations of communicative or eloquent silence, using it without some compromises can be questionable. In film, for example, this bipolar view, rooted in Jakobson’s school of thought, may work well only when applied for a quantitative study of silence compared to its opposite. Then, we might be able to argue that in the mainstream cinema silence is marked and its opposite is unmarked, while in the marked mode of Art Cinema, silence is unmarked, or at least, disrupts the dominance of non-silences in mainstream movies. This is, in fact, one of the main suppositions of the inductive approach of this research in chapters 3 and 4. Furthermore, to avoid the underlying ‘deviationism’, it might be possible to study silence by its own forms and functions, rather than a constant comparison to what it stands against. Although it seems that the latter has been the unmarked method of those who have written on silence, I will combine both views in my own approach when studying silences in Kiarostami.
1.3.4 Recent Approaches: Kurzon and Ephratt

As this brief history shows, from the beginning of pragmatic approaches to silence, it was examined in various types and classes. This simple but methodological lesson from pragmatics will be at the core of the rest of this thesis. To study silence in any given context – including film – we must break it down to its forms, applications, and functions. Understanding this process, and recognizing these categories, can help us configure a general conception of silence in each discourse.

I wish to finish this historiography with two recent works by researchers at the University of Haifa, that both incorporate a useful summary of pragmatic silence studies, and present novel opportunities for extending the semantic field of silence. In “Towards a Typology of Silence,” first published in 2007, Dennis Kurzon relies on previous attempts to organize his own typology. These include (but are not limited to) Bruneau’s study of three functional groups for silence (1973); Jensen’s five communicative functions of silence (1973); and Johannesen’s grouping of the four contexts of silence functions (1974). Kurzon’s own focus is “on the circumstances in which silence may be meaningful within dyadic or multi-party interaction” (1675). As such, he classifies silence into four groups that are represented in diagram 6, that I have extracted from his work.
Conversational

“The first type ... is the one that tends to be dealt with in the field of conversational analysis and, in general, in discourse analysis, where the discourse is spoken” (1676).

Thematic

“In thematic silence, a person when speaking does not relate to a particular topic,” and “seems deliberately to ignore a topic – s/he chooses silence instead of talking about that topic. Hence, the silence is thematic – it relates to a theme, topic or subject. In this type of silence, the theme or topic of the text is known, and perhaps the contents are also known” (1677).

Kurzon’s Typology of Silence

Textual

“A social interaction in which the S [silent person] or Ss [silent group] in a given context reads or recites a particular text in silence” (1679).

Situational

“In situational silence a group of people are silent but are not reading or reciting any specific text or anything at all” (1681).

Diagram 6: A summary of Kurzon’s typology of silence (2007)

One thing that should be noted in these categories is the far-reaching range of silences. Similar to and somewhat inspired by this typology, I will introduce the concept of ‘meta-silence’ in chapter 4, which will extend the powers of silence into the non-acoustic territories too. In this sense, not only some instances of character/dialogue silence (discussed in chapter 3) are related to Kurzon’s “situational” silence, but what I introduce as the political silence in Kiarostami (in chapter 4) will be justified as a form of “thematic” silence.
My last stop in the trajectory of linguists’ approaches to silence is a laudable essay by Michal Ephratt. “The Functions of Silence” is important both because of its amendments to the previous scholarly work by re-introducing the notion of ‘eloquent silence’, and because of the emphasis it puts on the turn-taking theory and discourse analysis. As you can see in the following quotation (also, visualized in my next diagram), Ephratt advocates the non-exteriority of silence in language and communication, and further stresses the significance of silence as a communicative tool.

Linguistics first became interested in silence by two different routes. The first, influenced by philosophy and literature, was an introductory and programmatic look at eloquent silence from a functional viewpoint (Jensen, 1973; Bruneau 1973), but this approach exerted no direct impact on the discipline. The second was acoustics, and only by this route was silence introduced as a subject of study. In the acoustic paradigm silence, as a topic, developed along two paths. One was the chronometrical analysis of speech, where quantitative chronometrical data on speech rates were collected to show the ratios of speech to non-speech, etc., in isolation or in relation to personality variables (...)The second path, which began to be trodden about the same time, was discourse analysis (then a new branch in linguistic pragmatics). Sacks et al.’s (1974) paper, “The {A?} simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking for conversation”, perceived silence as the interactive locus of turn-taking – ‘allocating the floor’ – during discourse.

(Ephratt 1910)
Following Tannen & Saville-Troike and Kurzon, Ephratt distinguishes between silence, stillness (the “absence of sound”, whose “antonym is not speech but noise”) (1911), unfilled and filled pauses (“(temporary) arrests between specific actions”) (1911), and silencing (“exercising power over another”) (1913). However, when it comes to her own notion of eloquent silence, Ephratt both incorporates the Sacks et al terminology of silence, pause, gap, lapse, and interval (1919), and equates it with literary and poetic techniques of metaphor, caesura, ellipsis, and blank lines (Ephratt 1925). What Ephratt believes to be an eloquent silence is an active means chosen by the speaker for significant verbal communication alongside speech (1911 & 1913). This ample scope of the opportunities that silence, as an intentional and meaningful choice in communication, provides for the sender (author) and receiver (interpreter), is a justification for further analyses of silence in other forms of communication, including arts, and particularly the art of cinema.
1.4 Looking For a Definition

This brief account of the forty-year history of silence in linguistics shows that in choosing the methodology of studying silence in any context, rather than considering it as a pre-objectified totality, one should trace it in its various forms and functions. Therefore, the encyclopedic definitions of the term, more than presenting a single semantic definition, circumscribe its contextual and symbolic limitations. That is why the first step of pragmaticians was rejecting the claims that fixed silence as an unknown nothingness, void, or empty space.

Silence is always in opposition to something else – in many cases speech, but also to a variety of aural and non-aural elements – and it can have different levels, one of which being the background silence. In short, the dominant view in the 1970s was that silence is mainly the background to sounds (Bruneau: “Silence is to speech as the white of this paper is to this print” (18); Johannesen: “Silence is the necessary substructure or background which gives meaning to speech communication” (1974)), while in the 1980s the background silence was believed to be only one level of different silences (Tannen & Saville-Troike xvii), and later, in the markedness theory, it was seen as the marked and therefore, foregrounded element of the opposition to the unmarked member. But whatever the foreground/background relation is, this relationship of silence/non-silence in communicative processes is always an intentional, active, and charged (non-neutral) one, because silence is never total or absolute.

But is it possible to determine a conclusive definition of silence based on all these findings or principles? So far, it seems that we have had a trajectory of defining silence as a void, an outrage, a lack, an absence, and finally a communicative tool and an eloquent part of the
communication. Note that the silence in each of these approaches is intrinsically different from the others, and also that these are not the only existing literature on the issue. For example, there have also been studies of silence as “a metaphor of absence” (Pinker 106, qtd in Ephratt 1910), which might be beneficial to this discourse. Not every silence is a metaphor, but any metaphor is a form of silence, since metaphor is the intentional avoidance of enunciating something as it is (and replacing it with something else). However, every silence can take a metaphorical aspect too. Also, it is true that silence is the absence of its opposite, but this absence is always in danger of being interpreted as indicating the lack of something which is considered worthy by its own, as it could have been present, and its non-presence is now felt and understood. But, at the same time, silence is a ‘communicative absence’ and can be seen as the ‘presence of an absence’ or minimalization. This positive view towards silence can help the researcher find its causes, references and functions, rather than being obsessed with what ‘is not there’.

Finally, the variety of discourses and taxonomies related to silence shows both an interdependence and an exclusive autonomy between the different pragmatic and semantic fields of silence. In other words, recognizing the fact that we do not have silence, we always have silences necessitates an altogether interdisciplinary approach even for analyzing certain modes of silence in any specific context. This view is also apparent in some of the literature on silence, including another pragmatic approach by Jack Bilmes in his “Constituting Silence: Life in the world of total meaning” (1994), in which he makes a distinction between absolute silence as “the simple absence of sound,” notable silence as “the relevant absence of a particular kind of sound,” and conversational silence as a subtype of notable silence, which is “the absence of
talk” (73-74). Bilmes also mentions that “conversational silence is further subdivided into innumerable kinds of particular silences” (74), and that “there are as many kinds of silence as there are of relevant sounds” (79).

In the end, we can come to a conclusion, which is not a definition by all means, but a useful frame of reference for any systematic study of silence in any phenomena. This conclusion is as follows:

1. *Silence is an intentional, relative, and charged space or ground within a communicative process.*

2. *It is the meaningful absence of something else, with a mechanism similar to a metaphor, with different levels and positions, from the background to the foreground, but overall mainly in the service of the communication.*

3. *Silence can act and be read within the two discourses of acoustics and pragmatics, the latter enabling us to consider it as the opposition to non-aural elements too.*

4. *Silence in different discourses can have different meanings, and even within one discourse it can take different forms and functions.*

5. *Therefore, there is no one silence, but many silences, and studying them necessitates discovering these forms and functions in an interdisciplinary approach.*

During the next chapters, in which I will delve into the concept of silence in cinema in general, and in Kiarostami’s works in particular, this description – and not necessarily the details of the methodologies used in pragmatics and linguistics – will be my main frame of reference.
Chapter 2: Silence in the Cinema: An Acoustic Overview

Picture 5. A snapshot from *The Silence* (Ingmar Bergman, 1963)
2.1 Formal Silence: Intentional and Systemic

The five conclusions of chapter 1 become more consequential when we consider the forms and meanings of silence in the more refined field of film. For example, defining silence in pragmatic terms as the meaningful absence of something else makes it possible to talk about trans-sensorial perceptions of non-acoustic silences in film – something that will be the subject of chapter 4 of this thesis. However, the history of silence studies in cinema, thin as it may be, has been mainly concerned with the absence of sound and voice, or, at most, noise and music, rather than a concentration on the presence of silence. Therefore, the cinematic approaches to silence have not managed to formulate a typology of filmic silences similar to the various categories discussed in the previous chapter. But even this merely acoustic view corresponds well with our previously discussed conclusions, including the intentionality, relativity, being charged, communicativeness, and the multiplicity of silence. Aiming to advance silence studies towards a coherent analytical system (with a focus on the presence of various kinds of cinematic silences), this chapter will provide a historical overview of the previous approaches by film theoreticians and critics.

Film is an audio-visual medium, in which two communicative systems are at work: an active system in the mise-en-scène, and a potential process between the film and its audience. The first is already there in the body of the film world, the second comes to life once the film starts to being viewed. Any theoretical or critical approach to filmic silences (or other constituents of cinematic communication) must determine its position in either of these two frameworks, or be so extensively receptive and multi-dimensional that can include them both. Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to study the nature of film as a communicative medium, it is
important here to note the significance of considering film as such, because otherwise, our previous conclusions and defining results will not be immediately applicable to film.

Penna, Mocci, and Sechi in their 2009 essay, “The Emergence of the Communicative Value of Silence,” define communication as “nothing but a macroscopic phenomenon, emergent from the interactions between elements of a communicative system” (30). This is, again, a pragmatic approach that seeks to reconcile the opposite paths of traditional “information theory” and “psychological perspectives”, through a purposeful use of the “methodological tools of Systemics and … theory of emergence” (30-31). In short, this systemic view of communication holds that 1) all the elements involved in a communication (even external observers) belong to a communicative system, and 2) through a cognitive net of circulation of inferences the system shapes a meaning (32-33). These Italian scholars argue that this way, “the problem of defining and detecting the intentionality of a single agent is entirely avoided,” because the “intentionality, the sharing of meanings, the awareness thus become emergent systemic properties, distributed within the system itself, and not always detectable when observing a single element or a single behavioral act” (33, emphasis in original). Finally, according to this view, silence, as one of the agents of a communication, is “a communicative phenomenon of systemic nature (...) that (...) becomes meaningful only if occurring within a system in which the circulation of inferences gives rise to the emergence of a global meaning” (33, emphasis in original). Therefore, the intentionality of silence in film is evident to the audience because of the existence of inferable signs.
This view, of course, is not unprecedented in film studies, and has roots in the neo-formalist/cognitive traditions of studying the formal reception of cinema in the works of David Bordwell (e.g. in *Making Meaning* – 1989) and Noël Carroll (e.g. in *Interpreting the Moving Image* – 1998, and *Engaging the Moving Image* – 2003). Based on these, we can safely assert that each film is already a coded text whose elements have communicative value. The interpreter must include all these elements as the constituents of the form of the film, and hence intended, active message-makers of a communication. Just as “where the rule is ‘Speak’, not speaking is communicative” (Bilmes 78), in film as text, anything that happens (or seemingly does not happen) is a formal component. Consequently, all cinematic silences are always intentional and communicative.

**2.2 Silence in Cinema: A Brief History**

**2.2.1 Cycles of Dominance**

New historiographies of cinema have now well proved that silent cinema was in fact rarely silent, particularly considering its various exhibition modes. Although we might be able to study different forms of meta-silence (a concept discussed in chapter 4) in the pre-1927 cinema, most of the existing literature on cinematic silences focuses mainly on silence as a sonic issue in the talking film. In addition, these studies further prove what was argued in the introduction of this thesis: silence is more dominant in Art Cinema; that is, a cinema praised by the critical orthodoxy of aesthetics, and canonized by the oeuvres of award-winning filmmakers from the top European film festivals: Cannes, Venice, Berlin.
In “Silence: Film Sound and the Poetics of Silence,” Des O’Rawe - one of the few scholars who uses silence as the specific subject of an essay - introduces three main cycles in the history of film in which silence has overshadowed other sonic elements. First, the European silent “sound films” of the early 1930s, namely in the works of British Hitchcock, German Lang, young Dreyer, and René Clair, “who augment, rather than impair, the artistic achievements of early cinema” (90). However, it seems that these filmmakers were most interested in the potentials of asynchronous sound. O’Rawe uses Noël Carroll’s theories about the European avant-garde of the era to give a broader view of these films, quoting Carroll that the engine of these films was “a penchant for asynchronous sound based on a paradigm of montage juxtaposition as a means to manipulate, to interpret, and to re-constitute pro-filmic events” (Carroll qtd in O’Rawe 90).

The second cycle of sound films with significant silent moments includes the art films of the well-known European directors of the 1960s. O’Rawe’s theoretical base for introducing this cycle is Noël Burch’s “On the Structural Use of Sound,” which is a study of the dialectical relations between the sound scope and the visual space on the one hand, and between the various elements of film sound, especially music, on the other hand. Although Burch’s examples of those “young filmmakers [who] have at last begun to be aware of the dialectical role silence can play relative to sound” is limited to Godard and a couple of more names (Burch 207), O’Rawe extends this list to include Antonioni, Bergman, Fellini, Tati, Dreyer, and Bresson too.

O’Rawe’s third cycle mainly contains the works of contemporary renowned Art film directors. He suggests that, “Despite the global dominance of narrative (‘noisy’) cinema, directors as diverse as Cassavetes, Tarkovsky, Angelopolous, Kubrick, Lynch, Kiarostami, Hou and Kitano
have consistently been producing work available to the inventive use of silence” (97). This statement, although unformulated and just a passing note, is very much in line with my contention in the introduction of this thesis that silence inevitably plays a big role in the so-called Art Cinema, and the few monographs on the role of silence in the works of these filmmakers or particular Art films (as we will see later in this chapter) support this claim.

2.2.2 Silence in Film Theory: Early Manifestos

Despite the powerful presence of silence in the practice of cinema, and the rise of academic interest in studying film sound since the 1980s, the theoretical literature on cinematic silences has not grown to be comparatively rich. Interestingly, silence was first discussed in film theories in the transitory period to sound in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Among the many manifestos written by the European theorists of the time, three pieces by Eisenstein, Arnheim, and Balázs proved to be more influential in the following film aestheticism and silence studies. What these works had in common was that they were mostly concentrated on speech or audible dialogue as the opposite to silence, and therefore, unlike their initial interpretations, even if they preferred the ‘silent cinema’, they did not have any problem with music, sound effects, and noise. Here, I will briefly address these writings to provide a trajectory of theoretical interest in cinematic silences.

“The Sound Film: A Statement from the USSR” is co-authored by Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Alexandrov, published first in Russian in a Leningrad magazine in August 1928 (Weis and Belton, 76), and later in the Geneva-based film journal of Close Up in English in October 1928 (O’Rawe).
While this “statement” announced “a cautious (and pragmatic) acceptance of sound in general, [it] also expressed fears about the perceived destructive effect of synchronized dialogue” (Burke 58). In fact, this early defense of silent cinema is by no means a defense of silence in the cinema, but merely a list of suggestions to maintain the status of cinema as an art, by treating sound as “a new montage element” (Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Alexandrov 84).

Another noteworthy attempt in defending both the artistic eminence of film and the unique qualities of silent cinema is Rudolph Arnheim’s supplement to his collection of essays, Film als Kunst (originally published in 1932, and titled only as Film and published in English in 1933). In “A New Laocoön: Artistic Composites and the Talking Film” (1938), Arnheim argues that “the talking film is not only a backward step in the course of film art but an aesthetic impossibility” (Weis and Belton 79). Arnheim’s purist view was based on his self-prescribed principles that determined what makes film an art, and what deprives it of such a state. Therefore, he was principally against “the kind of involved plot that we find in the novel and in the play” (Arnheim 113) and believed that the spoken dialogue narrows the world of the film and paralyzes visual action (Arnheim 113-15). However, nowhere in his Film as Art (the collection of his film essays published in English in 1957), does Arnheim comment on the value of silence in either pre-1927 cinema or in the sound film. This is, again, an attempt not to defend silence, but to attack spoken dialogue. As we will see in the next chapter, the absence or paucity of dialogue is only one of the many forms that silence can take in the cinema.

Béla Balázs may be the only notable film theorist of the transitional (to sound) period who acknowledges the values of silence both in the silent era and in the sound film. Surprisingly, the
full texts of Balázs’ two main cinema books were not published in English until 2010 (Balázs ix). In *Der Sichtare Mensch* (*Visible Man*, originally published in 1924), he admits that “the [silent] film actor speaks, exactly as does the stage actor. There is no difference in his gestures. We just do not hear him; but we see him speak” (25, emphasis in original). In a passage sub-headed “The Silent Art and the Art of Silence,” he makes a comparison between pantomime as a truly silent art, and film as merely soundless, concluding that “[silent] film does not reveal to us the soul of silence” (25). Therefore, it is not surprising that three years after the advent of talkies, Balázs welcomes the opportunities that this uncovering of potentials brings up for the cinema.

His short passages on silence (and isolation, and space) in *Der Geist des Films* (*The Spirit of Film*, first published in Germany in 1930), are also important in relation to his previous work, for he maintains the same comparison to pantomime, but this time praises film for being able to show silence. He states that sound film is the first among the arts to discover how to represent silence. He argues that this is an achievement that no other sound-involved media could present; not even radio play (because silence should be seen, otherwise “what we hear is not silence, but simply nothing”), nor theatre (because “the great, ‘cosmic’ experience of silence is a spatial experience”) (191). To him, the two conditions of cinematic silence are contrast (“the deaf do not know what silence is”) and space (“silence occurs when what I hear is [in] distance”) (191). These qualities can only happen in real life and in sound film, and that is what prioritizes sound film to both pantomime and silent film: “a space that is only seen never becomes concrete. We experience only the space that we can also hear” (Balázs 191).
2.2.3 Sparse Views and a Lack of Coherent Theories

It is surprising that for more than five decades after the initial reactions to the advent of talkies, sound did not have a significant role in theoretical and critical writings on the cinema. More surprising, though, is the fact that even with the escalation of academic interest in sound studies in the 1980s and 1990s, the volume of writings on silence is still very small. For example, in two of the often quoted readers on sound in cinema, *Film Sound: Theory and Practice* (co-edited by Elisabeth Weis and John Belton in 1985) and *Sound Theory/Sound Practice* (edited by Rick Altman in 1992) apart from some random, vague, and insinuative brief notes, there is not even one essay in which silence appears as the main subject of the research, or its significance in film is directly addressed. However, there are signs of the formation of an interest in silence studies in recent years, which will shortly be discussed.

It seems that, until recently, the efforts for including silence as part of bigger theoretical schemes have mainly been scarce, sparse, and incoherent. Some of these come from the people within the cinematic practice; that is, filmmakers and sound designers. One of the first examples is the collection of Robert Bresson’s brief reflections on cinema: *Notes sur le Cinématographe* (1975). Bresson, who believed that sound and image have independent identities and while accompanying each other should not interfere with the other’s functions, wrote that: “Le cinéma sonore a inventé le silence,” and “silence absolu et silence obtenu par le pianissimo des bruits” (47, emphasis in original), meaning that “The sound cinema [or “the soundtrack” in Griffin’s translation (1986, 38)] invented silence,” and “absolute silence and silence obtained by the pianissimo of noises.”
Another example of filmmakers aware of and eloquent about the significance of silence is Mike Figgis, who in a lecture in 1998 (titled “Silence: The Absence of Sound”) complains how the sound people in Hollywood consider absolute silence (having “nothing” on the soundtrack) a taboo: “Every time I’ve tried to do that in the past, a sound person has said, ‘No, you can’t have *nothing* on a soundtrack. If you want silence, you have to approximate silence with what’s called “room tone”. It’s like quiet white noise. But you can’t have zero’” (Figgis 1, emphasis in original). Figgis continues to explain his own experience of breaking this unwritten rule in an affective moment of *Leaving Las Vegas* (1995). However, as we saw before (and will talk about in more detail later), what Figgis calls the experience of having “real silence” in film, is itself impossible and un-real by its nature.

Walter Murch, a sound designer known for his incredible work in *Touch of Evil* (Orson Welles, 1958) and *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979), is another film practitioner whose writings on sound have occasional tips on silence too (see, for example, his introduction to Chion’s *Audio-Vision*, and his interview with Frank Paine in *Film Sound*). In his 1998 lecture in Institut français, London, UK (transcripted in *Soundscape*), Murch directly talks about the two kinds of silence that he designed for *Apocalypse*. The first one he calls *locational silence*, which is a sudden cut to another location, and can also show a shift in the point of view. Murch’s own example is a cut from Wagner’s *Ride of the Valkyries* and the sound and image of helicopters to a quiet schoolyard: “It’s done for the purposes of demonstrating a shift in location but also for the visceral effect of a sudden transition from loudness to silence” (Murch 95). Murch also emphasizes that “all transitions to silence have a psychological component,” and the second kind of silence he introduces is in fact a more psychologically driven one (95). It is achieved by
“reducing the sound track incrementally” while paying particular attention to “the curve of the slope” (96). This is basically narrowing down the sounds to a thin sound, which should be done delicately, because a too fast or a too slow transition might lose its effect on the audience. Murch’s example for this kind of silence is shrinking the jungle sounds to a creature called the “the glass insect” in Apocalypse: “So we’ve done very much what Michel [Chion] was calling ‘the silence of the orchestra around the single flute’ – or the single insect in this case” (96). Murch’s writings, partially indebted to Michel Chion, are overall not really theoretical, and more than anything else relate the experiences that many sound editors and mixers and designers all over the world have been performing.

Film scholars and practitioners also seem to completely agree with the notion of relativity of silence, which in itself can refer to both its definition in relation to its opposite(s) and its own non-absolute nature. In his discussion on the role of music in the sound structure of film in Praxis du cinéma (published in French in 1969, and in English (as Theory of Film Practice) in 1973), and writing on a variety of films without categorizing them under any label, Noël Burch announces:

After a long period during which the talking picture with a musical score seems to have been haunted by the terror, or perhaps the memory, of silence, young filmmakers have at last begun to be aware of the dialectical role silence can play relative to sound. These filmmakers have even succeeded in making a subtle yet basic distinction between the different “colors” of silence (a complete dead space on the soundtrack, studio silence, silence in the country, and so forth), thus glimpsing some of the structural roles such silences can play (as is particularly evident in Deux ou trois
choses que je sais d’elle [Two or Three Things I Know about Her, Jean-Luc Godard, 1967].

(Burch 207)

However, it took almost fifty years until the first serious account of these “different colors of silence” appeared in film theory. In “Almost Silent,” Paul Théberge not only repeats the relativity of silence “to sounds heard in the context of the film” (53), but tries to map down the relationship of silence (“in both a literal and figurative manner”) “to narrative, to technology, to generic conventions, and to the culture at large” (53). Despite the limited viewpoint of Théberge for covering a very broad scope, his structural analysis is capable of serving as a model for more detailed categorizations of silences in the cinema. Basically, it seems that to Théberge silence is (or acts as) the interruption of a flow. As such, he distinguishes between three modes of relational silence in the soundtrack; diegetic silence (the silence of diegetic world, “whereas other parts, such as music, continue to sound or are given special prominence” (54)), musical silence (the interruption or absence of music when its presence is expected based on the context of the film or the conventions of genre), and dialogue silence (which is the momentary absence of dialogue for dramatic effects). Théberge studies some of the functions of these modes (especially for diegetic silence, as you can see in my next diagram), and then maintains his formal method to look for the roots of their occurrence. This leads to a new categorization: Silence is an acoustic interruption when we do not expect it, either because of the textual structure of the film (structural silence) or the intertextual conventions of the genre (generic silence), or even the dominating and unique quality of a film’s auditory field (stylistic silence).
1) Representing the inner life of characters, their dreams, fantasies, or moments of mental anguish

2) Representing any moment in which reality exceeds our expectation, when the real becomes surreal.

3) Bridging the gap between temporal and spatial moments in film narrative.

Diagram 8: A summary of Théberge’s functions of diegetic silence (2008, 57)

As a starting point for the rest of this project, I will embrace Théberge’s taxonomic suggestions; but, instead of applying his patterns, I will limit myself to the framework of one filmmaker, who in return, will allow us to extend the functional and structural mapping of silence to a certain mode of cinematic practice. This way, we might in fact manage to present a more conclusive ground for studying the potentials of silence in the cinema in general. Also, to make a bridge between various discourses on silence in different theoretical disciplines and the practice of cinema itself, we should acknowledge the work of those few film scholars who actually have used silence as their main tool of research, to reach the specific and combinatory methodology that we can use for our own purposes. As we will see in my two examples of “Theory in Practice” (section 5 of this chapter), due to the thinness of previous studies on cinematic silence, film scholars have mainly benefited from the three fields of acoustics, philosophy, and psychoanalysis. So, here, it is necessary to take a brief look at two of the more influential figures in these auxiliary discourses who have contributed significantly to the use of theories of
silence in practical film studies: Michel Chion (acoustics and film sound) and Jean-Luc Nancy (philosophy).

2.3 Michel Chion’s Project

If not the most prominent, doubtlessly one of the most influential theorists on sound in cinema is the French composer and film theorist, Michel Chion. Even before Claudia Gorbman embarks on translating and publishing Chion’s main three books in English (Audio-Vision in 1994, The Voice in Cinema in 1999, and Film, A Sound Art in 2009), some of Chion’s unique definitions were filling the gaps in film readers of the 1980s and 1990s. Chion’s principle in his project is that film is an audiovisual contract in which sound has an added value to make the audience believe “this information or expression “naturally” comes from what is seen” (Chion, Audio-Vision 5).

One of the implications of accepting the relativity of silence – discussed in the previous chapter – is that to know silence, one must acknowledge and define its counterpart, and this is exactly what Chion does and what we can benefit from for our own discussion. However, because of the expansion of Chion’s work, the diversity of his neologisms, and various rules and exceptions that he enacts, explaining and arguing for or against all his suggestions would make at least a full chapter by itself. Therefore, here I confine myself to mention only a few of his ideas about silence in the cinema before and after 1927, categories of sound and voice, and modes of listening.
2.3.1 Silence and *The Voice in Cinema*

The term Chion uses for what we know as silent era is “deaf cinema” (Chion, *Voice* 7). He argues that film exhibition before 1927 did not really leave much room for silence. These films were “always accompanied by music from the outset,” sometimes had “sound effects created live in some movie houses,” and there were also the commentators who translated, narrated, and freely explained the story of the film or the subtitles to the regular, illiterate, or unfamiliar-to-foreign-languages audiences (Chion, *Voice* 7-8). Chion also rejects the term mute cinema, as the Latinos (or, in my case, Iranians) would call it, because “on the contrary, film characters were quite chatty” (Chion, *Voice* 8). He concludes that, “it’s not that the film’s characters were mute, but rather that the film was deaf to them... still, this spectator who is forced to be deaf cannot avoid hearing voices – voices that resonate in his or her own imagination” (Chion, *Voice* 8).

Moreover, this deaf cinema could not produce or tolerate an auditory silence. To Chion, silence is a lack “necessary for the sound film’s full functioning” (Chion, *Voice* 10), which both the deaf cinema and early sound films lacked, because they did not have the technical silencing power, and could not allow their audience to truly *hear* silence (Chion, *Voice* 95). To Chion, suspension of speech in the verbocentric medium of film is a major form of cinematic silence, and therefore, new sound technologies like Dolby can frame the background silence and increase the dynamic contrast in a way that both deepens the silence, and makes the voice more conspicuous (Chion, *Voice* 167).
2.3.2 Audio-Vision: Sound Zones, Acousmêtre, and Listening Modes

Chion’s most cogent contribution to film studies is his 1991 *L’Audio-Vision*, edited and translated into English by Claudia Gorbman in 1994. This book contains the essence of Chion’s project which is categorizing different cinematic sounds and voices. Benefiting from previous studies by Pierre Schaeffer, Chion divides all filmic sound into *acousmatic* (“sounds one hears without seeing their originating cause”), and *visualized* (accompanied by the sight of its source or cause”) (72). Then, he further groups the acousmatic into *offscreen* (“sound whose source is invisible, whether temporarily or not”) and *nondiegetic* sound (“external to the story world”) (73) (see figure 1). Although Chion’s taxonomies are not limited to these groups - and in fact go on to form many other divisions such as active, passive, ambient, frontal, back, internal, on-the-air, and so forth – arguably, many other categorizations of film sounds can be studied according to this principal scheme.

![Figure 1: Sound Zones (Chion, Audio-Vision 74)](image-url)
However, as any other human-thought rule, there is an exception to this one; a third group of sounds which he calls *phantom* or *negative*, as they form or are formed by a negative space, a “space in the gap” (according to Murch in the introduction) or *en crue* (in Chion’s own words). In her explanatory note on this group, Gorbman writes, “Chion is negotiating the territory of transference from one sensory channel to another, which sometimes produces psychological ‘presence’ in the face of perceptual ‘absence’” (qtd in Chion, Audio-Vision 218). In fact, Chion is using Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s statement that “ghost is the kind of perception made by only one sense” (qtd in Chion, Audio-Vision 125). This psychological presence of an entity—something which has an equivalent in a real or imagined life, or its existence is imaginable—despite the impossibility of a multi-sensorial experience of that entity (which in the case of film is only seeing and hearing) is important because this corresponds to our notion of silence as the intentional and relative yet communicative and meaningful absence.

Chion’s ultimate example of such a sound in the case of human voice is *acousmêtre*: an acousmatic character in film whose voice is heard, but his/her body and his/her mouth is not seen, and yet he/she is completely diegetic. Acousmêtre carries some uncanny powers (omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence) until becomes de-acousmatized by visualization (in The Voice in Cinema Chion mentions different levels and kinds of acousmêtre, such as complete, partial, commentator, radio, and already-visualized). This mystery or power of the phantom phenomenon, whether in acousmêtre or in its opposite (which is a character whose body is seen but his/her voice is absent) is an aspect of the magical power of silence. This power is fed by the audiences’ sense of awe facing the filmmaker’s abstinence from providing everything. The roots of this awe might be in religion (as seen in divine figures), in
psychology (of us facing a higher quality than our own being) or even politics (like bowing down to a king who either does not speak to us or whose face is masked).

The basis of Chion’s project is the ear and the audible, and so in a chapter of *Audio-Vision* he raises the issue of different levels of *écoute* – which Gorbman translates to both “listening” and “mode of listening” (216). Chion defines three modes of listening as *causal, semantic,* and *reduced*. The first is “listening to a sound in order to gather information about its cause (or source)” (25). The most common and also the most deceptive of them all, causal listening provides supplementary information about the visible source, and by a cause and effect logic tries to make an image for the acousmatic sound (or provide us with the possibility of guessing about the source: a dog, a mechanical sound, the sound of jungle). It is noteworthy that what we hear in a film is usually the result of more than one source, a multi-layering of the soundtrack, and the very audiovisual interaction. Therefore, even in the case of the visualized sounds, the audio-viewer’s imagination plays an important role in this kind of listening (This is, in fact, what happens a lot in in the films of Kiarostami, as we will see in the next chapter).

The second mode of listening is semantic, “which refers to a code or a language to interpret a message” (28). Semantic listening is specifically important to linguists, and as we saw before, should not be limited only to the spoken dialogue and the referential function of the communication. In other words, semantic listening can be not only about the meaning of the sound we hear in a film, but the meaning that it has the potential to make in relation to the other elements of the language of the film.
The third mode is the reduced listening which “focuses on the traits of the sound itself, independent of its cause and of its meaning” (29). Borrowed from Husserl’s phenomenological notion of reduction (216), this is the study of sound for the sake of sound, and relates primarily to the physicality of sound itself. This mode has a positive value for the acousticians and a negative value for a silence-researcher. For listening to silence, even in its relative existence, is not listening to the thin sounds remained on the soundtrack. Silence, even in its noisiest form – the noisiest scene which you might still find silent compared to the rest of the film – is not the reduced soundtrack; it is the disappearance of the previous or expected sounds. But the negative value comes from the fact that what makes the absent sounds or the present thin sound to be materialized is silence. You need to silence some elements to be able to attune yourself to reduced listening otherwise it would be almost impossible, especially for an untrained ear. A good example is listening to an orchestra. My ear is unable to recognize the specific instruments and their sounds in a full orchestra, until there appears a solo playing and the rest is silenced. If I can recognize the instrument I am doing causal listening, if I can imagine the emotions it wants to convey I am in the semantic mode, and if I concentrate on the materiality of the sound itself, reduced listening is performed. However, there are some conductors and directors who can lead their audience to any of these three modes of listening in a certain moment, or at least, provide the possibility of choosing from these modes, instead of bombarding us with sounds. (And isn’t it what Hollywood and Bollywood try to do? Making us constantly be amazed by the reduced listening of explosions and songs, of unintelligible noises and clamour? And isn’t it yet another form of silence itself?) As we will see in my examples from Kiarostami’s films, what reinforces all these three modes of listening is
acousmatic sound, as it seeks more concentrated listening from the audience, and it activates our imagination as well.

### 2.4 Jean-Luc Nancy’s Listening

Despite its recentness (or perhaps because of that), Jean-Luc Nancy’s short philosophical and phenomenological treatise on listening can be a major source for silence studies in film. À l’écoute is written in 2002, and translated into English as *Listening* and published in 2007. The original form of the words is important because Nancy first makes a distinction between *écoute* (listening) and *entendre* (hearing/understanding), and studies the relation between these two and *sens* (feeling/intuition/direction). Nancy introduces the philosopher as someone who cannot listen to anyone or anything but himself as the subject, and because of that is someone who always hears (Nancy, *Listening* 1). He elaborates, “if ‘to hear’ is to understand the sense... to listen is to be straining toward a possible meaning, and consequently one that is not immediately accessible” (Nancy, *Listening* 6). One of his examples for “listening” is that “we listen to what can arise from silence and provide a signal or a sign” (Nancy, *Listening* 6). It would be a mistake to think that Nancy makes an evaluative judgement between these two or prioritizes one to the other on philosophical or phenomenological grounds. “Hearing” is a search for the truth, for the “sense” both as a mind/meaning relation (perceived meaning) and a sensory feeling (perceiving sense), and if it doesn’t lead to understanding the text, at least can show us the context. “Listening,” on the other hand, does not necessarily result in a philosophical or phenomenological understanding, but is the condition for a resonance in the
listener. So, listening is “an intensification and a concern, a curiosity or an anxiety” (Nancy, *Listening* 5). So it seems that Nancy’s listening is related to Chion’s third mode of listening, both presenting the auditor with some responsibilities and opportunities.

In fact, now we can consider silence as a sonorous space – “a place that becomes a subject insofar as sound resounds there” (Nancy, *Listening* 17) – for mutual and infinite referrals of sound and meaning in which both listening and hearing can take place. Therefore, silence can be a space for approaching a self, because, as Nancy asserts, “a self is nothing other than a form or function of a referral” (Nancy, *Listening* 8). Based on this configuration, the listener himself can become that silent and sonorous space for the formation of self. Nancy concludes,

> The subject of the listening or the subject who is listening (but also the one who is “subject to listening”...) is... no subject at all, except as the place of resonance, of its infinite tensions and rebound, the amplitude of sonorous deployment and the slightness of its simultaneous redeployment.

(Nancy, *Listening* 21-22)

So when Nancy talks about silence, he does not necessarily mean the same concept we have studied so far, as the rarefaction of aural elements in film studies traditions or the relative and meaningful absence of something as perceived by the same sense or trans-sensorially in pragmatics. Nancy’s silence is also the active act of the listener who can become a resonant subject by being a sonorous space. From this perspective, the film audio-viewer can choose to
be silent for listening too: “‘Silence’ in fact must here be understood [s’entendre, heard] not as a privation but as an arrangement of resonance” (Nancy, Listening 21).

2.5 Theory in Practice: Two Examples of Using Silence as the Main Approach in Writing on Cinema

2.5.1 Sample 1: Silence in an Auteur’s Oeuvre

Lisa Coulthard’s essays on Haneke (‘Listening to Silence: The Films of Michael Haneke’ (2010), and “Haptic Aurality: Listening to the Films of Michael Haneke” (2012)) are excellent examples of using silence studies as the subject of a film studies project. Here, the researcher studies the oeuvre of the Austrian Palme d’Or winner which, she claims, is mostly “about the miscommunication inherent in verbal dialogue and the weighty meaning of silence” (Coulthard, “Listening” 19). In actuality, Coulthard emphasizes both Chion’s reduced mode of listening (without naming it), and Nancy’s suggestions in Listening as the backbone of her study, resulting in the statement that, “silence is not, then, the absence of sound but its essence, and the body of the subject is its origin and endpoint” (Coulthard, “Listening” 20). From this perspective, and given the writer’s references to some psychological concepts such as trauma and deep listening, one of the conclusions she draws is that in the truly silent moments of a film, essentially it is the audience who is exposed to listening to oneself listening as a process of self-formation.

Coulthard’s definition of silence follows the same conservative tradition of a relative and comparative concept which is mainly based on background elements. From here, she
introduces “the formal, structural silences of Haneke’s signature acoustically minimalistic style: the absence of non-diegetic music, the prominence of noise, the scarcity of dialogue” (Coulthard, “Listening” 20). Although these features are not meant to be a catalogue of symptoms that permit or justify a silence-oriented study of the works of a filmmaker - as a counter-example, instead of ‘scarce dialogue’ we face an over-abundance of dialogue in some of Kiarostami’s films which lead to another kind of silence - they represent a model of ‘silence studies’ in the cinema which is less tried and probably more fruitful: one of the ways for critically approaching the world of an esteemed art-film director, who has peculiar and much controlled use of the soundscape of his films, is studying the ways he incorporates silence in the body of his works. Such an approach is not only genuinely ‘cinematic’, but allows the researcher to make use of the configurations of this concept in other related discourses too.

Besides the conclusions that Coulthard makes from analyzing the relation between silence, ethics, and violence in Haneke’s films, her essay contains two major implications which are crucial to my discussion of Kiarostami’s silences in the next chapters. First, she parallels silence and its functions with “thematic fracturing of meaning” (a “fragmentation or sense of partial knowledge”) in Haneke’s images and narratives (Coulthard, “Listening” 20). However, based on the definitions I have presented so far, I will consider these thematic, narrative, and cognitive fragmentations as some forms of silence. This rather radical shift from ‘parallel’ to ‘extension’ is important because it can progress the existing widespread literature on silence one directive step forward, turning the parallel paths (such as acoustics and narratology and so forth ) into some concentric circles with a central key term.
The second implication is even more significant for our purposes here. Coulthard asserts, “Taken together, these moments of silence (thematic or formal, relative or absolute) stress that one element of truly listening is to hear silence and to recognize that it is not silent at all” (Coulthard, “Listening” 23). The premise of such a bias is what we have discussed earlier: “even when total, then, silence in the cinema is never absolute,” which is backed up here by such facts as mechanical sounds, hearing on an imaginary level because of the absence of sounds or the presence of visual image, and even our bodily noises (Coulthard, “Listening” 23) - to which one can add the noises of film exhibition venues, especially in North America and in Asia. Despite the validity of this argument (which is in a way a culmination of the works of previous scholars like Balázs, Chion, and Murch) it shows an orientation towards studying what is there, or what is not silent. This is actually what I earlier defined as the negative value of reduced mode of listening in describing Chion’s views. From this, two principal divisions of silence studies in the cinema can be distinguished. On the one hand, by analyzing the ostensibly silent scenes, researchers such as Coulthard discover in them layers which in fact disprove that silence, and invite the reader/audience to do a much closer seeing, hearing, and interpreting, and on the other hand, one can use the ostensibly non-silent moments (by a mechanism similar to the positive value of reduced listening) and argue that in these scenes some elements have been silenced that need to be studied. As we will see in the next chapter, such an analysis works on the same line as Coulthard’s, but towards the other direction: towards what is silent and absent, or basically, what is not.
2.5.2 Sample 2: Silence in a Single Film

Tarja Laine’s “Resonating Sonic Space: The Silence” is another recent example of using silence as the main subject of film analysis. As part of a chapter on “anguish” in her *Feeling Cinema* (2011), Laine also uses both Nancy and Chion for studying the affective and emotional levels of silence in Ingmar Bergman’s 1963 masterpiece, *Tsytnaden (The Silence)*. Unlike its title, Bergman’s film barely goes without a second when the audience is not bombarded with intensified noises of the urban life, clamour of planes and trains and cars and tanks, diegetic music, dialogue, and even exaggerated bodily sounds (breathing, coughing, combing one’s hair, touching, etc.). In fact, acoustically, *The Silence* is a cacophony of all kinds of sound, or at least, a master class in making the audience turn their *reduced mode of listening* on.

Laine notes that with the exception of the sound of a clock ticking and a kind of “wail” (or maybe a magnified hum of the wind outside) all the sounds in the film are entirely diegetic and simultaneous (76). She also notes that the majority of these sounds are noises, both “inside” and “outside” (that is, noises interior and noises exterior), with the striking difference of a “penetrating” quality for the outside noises, and an “enveloping” one for the interiors (77). She further distinguishes the sounds in spatial terms, proposing three concentric acoustic circles, each charged with their own emotional landscapes. The outer circle contains the sounds of the city life and is Anna’s emotional landscape; the middle circle is the aural vacuum of the hotel and is Johan’s area; and the inner circle is the hotel room which is the aural and emotional landscape of Ester (You can see my visualization of these circles in figure 2).
As you can see in the figure above, the core of all these circles is silence. But, I should add, that we must not consider this silence as a single and unique entity. In fact, each of these circles has their own specific version of silence. For Anna, it is a constant lack of calm and self-control, both physically and emotionally. She is simultaneously attracted to and appalled by the city, the exterior, and whatever it brings for her, symbolized by the unbearable hot weather. She cannot even communicate with her tacit lover, but tells him (us?) that this is to their own benefit. So, her silence is one derived from frustration and uncertainty. Her son, Johan, can only be free from this ambivalent mother in the corridors of the hotel and its suffocated sounds. We never know whether the sounds he hears or the things he sees (namely, the tanks) are real or only objectifications of his own constant fear. His hidden silence then is one coming from a constant fear. And for the depressed and panicky Ester, the absent is élan vital. She is a translator who cannot communicate anymore, who cannot, in a word, translate the outer world to her own. Furthermore, we never get to know what exactly has happened in the back story of this
troubled family, why they have come to this strange journey, and where is this country they have to spend at least a night in.

Acoustically, Laine holds that the prominent sounds of silence “emphasize the emptiness” (as in the first sequence of the film in the train compartment). Heavily relying on Nancy, she concludes that, “This is why sound in The Silence is silent, especially in the middle circle. It lacks the aspect of event or resonance. Sound in The Silence is silent, because it offers itself to be heard not to be listened to” (79). The significance of Laine’s work for our discussion here is that, although, like Coulthard’s analysis, hers is dependent on the ways of “listening to silence”, she searches for the absent in what is there both on the soundtrack and in the meanings the film offers. This is how she detects other kinds of silence in the film, such as the silence-making language or words (“since it functions to set up barriers instead of bridging distances between individuals,” (79)); the silence-making enclosed emotions between the characters, and between each character and his/her own external or internal world (as they have become deaf to each other and can only hear, rather than listen); and even the fact that each character remains only in his/her own specific spatial-acoustic world despite the constant threat of the penetration of other worlds, as the suggestive sounds of planes and tanks and lovemakings, and even the presence of male dwarfs in women’s clothes, indicate.

In her brilliant conclusion, Laine relates all these structural elements and concepts to the active role of audience in making the sounds and absences of The Silence resonant or, on the contrary, silent:
At first, the film’s violent resonance disrupts the listening process and produces resistance instead of mutual resounding. Thus, a certain amount of effort is required from the spectator in order to gain insight into the film. Yet it is precisely this effort that renders *The Silence* a sounding board for the spectator. By forcing upon the spectator the distressful effects of emotional deafness through unsolicited sonic penetration, the film leaves the spectator with two choices. One either closes oneself up, in which case the film will remain silent forever. The alternative is to open oneself up to its resonance regardless of its dissonant properties.

(Laine 83)

The effort needed for this second “choice” will result in, according to Laine, a rewarding anguish, which “comes as an invitation to gain insight into listening as a form of being-with, the only protection mechanism against agonizing human loneliness” (83).

Laine’s strategy of distinguishing different silences and discussing their implications enables her to search for and find silence amid the clamour. From this viewpoint, we can finally say that despite its noisy surface, Bergman’s film is highly based on different forms of silence. In addition, this conclusion about any film or work of art, also equips us with the magnifier of ‘silence’ for further textual analysis through a double trigger mechanism. For example, in the case of Bergman’s film, we can conclude that, in fact, the only common language among the characters is music. While the adults of the film are unable to verbally communicate to each other (both because of their own silencing forces and the language barriers in a foreign land), and the only child maliciously hides the photos that the old waiter shows him with tears in his eyes under a carpet in the hotel corridor where he had previously peed in, it is the instrumental and transcendental music of Bach that can connect all these separate worlds together. In a
short scene in which the characters are each sunk in their own silences, the overall silence of the film briefly vanishes.

In the background, Anna has hugged her son who asks when they would go home and whether his aunt would accompany them or not. In the foreground, Ester is smoking a cigarette and listening to the music played from a portable radio. The waiter enters, and Ester asks him: “What is that- music [moossik]?” The waiter corrects her: “Music [moozik] ... music [moozik] ...” Ester adds: “Sebastian Bach?” and the waiter confirms: “Sebastian Bach. Johann Sebastian Bach.” As the following snapshot of the scene shows, it seems that for a brief moment, through the acousmatic, on-the-air, radio-acousmètre sound of Bach, the curtain of silence is momentarily pulled back from this group, and they can pose for a transitory moment of insouciant family bliss. Something that later, even the aggressive Anna admits: “It’s nice!”

Picture 6. “Sebastian Bach... Johann Sebastian Bach”: The only non-silent moment in The Silence
2.6 Conclusion

As demonstrated here, unlike the fairly coherent and programmatic studies of silence in the communications and pragmatic linguistics, the writings on silence in either general acoustics or sound studies in the cinema have been rather discontinuous, sporadic, and under-theorized. However, the examples studied in this chapter also indicate promising perspectives for the future of studying cinematic silences. Attempts to reconstruct a structural categorization for the long neglected subject of filmic silence (such as Théberge’s), interdisciplinary studies of the role of silence in the works of Art film auteurs (such as Coulthard’s), and textual analyses of specific films according to their employment of silences (Murch, Laine, etc.), are all parts of what I call ‘silence studies’ in the cinema.

Arguably, these independent attempts can be organized under a more systematic framework that can build up a template for similar researches. In the next two chapters, through an extensive case study, I will try to make use of the existing literature on silence in the fields introduced so far, to provide an example of a practical method for studying different audio-visual silences. As argued in chapter 1, any pragmatic study of silences needs to first detect the different forms of silence in the communicative medium under scrutiny, and then analyze the functions of each form in their specific context. Therefore, we can divide cinematic silences into the two main branches of acoustic and non-acoustic silences, and then, through a sampled study of the sub-categories of each division, reach a conclusive map of the silences in the cinema.
Chapter 3: Acoustic Silences in the Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami

Picture 7. A portrait of Abbas Kiarostami (“Abbas Kiarostami”)
3.1 The Significance of Abbas Kiarostami

Film begins with D. W. Griffith and ends with Abbas Kiarostami.

(Jean-Luc Godard qtd in Mottahedeh 90)

As we saw in the last chapter, Haneke and Bergman are two of the vanguards of Art Cinema whose works violate the normative relations of sound and soundlessness in conventional mainstream movies, making silence either a conspicuous ground for listening, or a figure, a tone, a ‘performer’ in the matrix of the film which is more a circumstance than a result. For more than forty prolific years, Abbas Kiarostami (born in 1940) has also been continually experimenting with the potentials of cinema to go beyond the normalized combinations of sound and image. From The Bread and Alley (1970) to Like Someone in Love (2012), Kiarostami has made more than 40 short and long features and documentaries, contributed independently to the New Wave of Iranian cinema in the 1970s, and along with a few other Asian filmmakers (Hong Konger Wong Kar Wai, Taiwanese Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Chinese Chen Kaige, and Japanese Shohei Imamura), has been one of the ringleaders of the Asian Art Cinema in the 1990s international circuits, leading to the co-winning of the prestigious Palme d’Or award from the Cannes Film Festival in 1997, for Taste of Cherry. Furthermore, Kiarostami’s talents have not been limited to filmmaking. He has had numerous international exhibitions of his photos, installations, and video art; published books of poetry (in Farsi, but also translated to other languages); and recently prepared eclectic ‘readings’ of ancient and modern Iranian poets (Hafiz, Rumi, Saadi, and Nima Youshij). So, not only is Kiarostami an excellent example of an Art
Cinema auteur who exploits different kinds of cinematic silences in all his films, but also his unique worldview can be traced in his other artistic endeavours as well.

A detailed analysis of Kiarostami’s works might indicate what kinds of silence are dominant in each film. This inductive method can result in a new reading of Kiarostami’s cinema as a silence-dependent form of art. But since this method will limit the scope of the research only to our case study, the strategic reasoning used in this thesis will be deductive; that is, using the conclusions made in the previous two chapters, first I will introduce functional categorizations of cinematic silences, and then will study the applications and implications of each category through some examples from Kiarostami’s works. This strategy will also be more in line with the bigger goal of this thesis which is proposing the discourse of ‘silence studies’ for studying works of art in general. Therefore, the results of this research will be both pertinent to the cinema of Kiarostami and applicable to the similar cases in the global Art Cinema. As we will see, ‘silence studies’ can act as the unifying methodology in studying Kiarostami, in which all the previous literature on him (by theoreticians and critics such as Nancy, Rosenbaum, Saeed-Vafa, Mulvey, Elena, Dabashi, Andrew, etc.) can come together in a solid yet flexible framework. I will also argue that silence has narrative, ethical, aesthetic, political, and philosophical powers in Kiarostami. Finally, in a wider perspective, this research can provide a template for cinematic silence studies.

In this chapter, I will focus on the more conventional *acoustic silences*, which include ‘complete silence’, ‘partial silences’ (uncovered; covered with noise, music, or perspective), ‘character/dialogue silence’, ‘language silence’, and ‘music silence’. *Non-acoustic silences*
('visual', 'character/image', 'narrative', and 'political') will be the subject of the next chapter. In both chapters, I will try to inter-mix the previous critique of Kiarostami with my findings, and present new, inter-connected, and more inclusive readings of Kiarostami’s films and the literature on them based on the tools of my own approach.

3.2 Complete Silence (The Chorus, Homework, Close-Up)

So far we have argued that the existence of an absolute silence is impossible, both in theory and in practice, and that is why we can only talk about relational or relative silences. However, as Théberge admits in the beginning of his article, absolute silence is a rarity in the cinema (51), meaning that there still are some rare occasions when there is nothing on the soundtrack, such as the aforementioned one in Mike Figgis’ Leaving Las Vegas. Instead of nothing, or absolute silence, using the mathematical perception of the limit of a sequence, this might be called the ‘limit of silence’, which is the infinitesimal value that the terms of a sequence (here, the sonic elements) get close to eventually; it is never zero, but is as close as it gets. But to make it easier to remember, and to further contrast with other kinds of silence, I call this ‘relative absolute silence’ - this ‘limit of silence’ - complete silence.

In at least three cases, Kiarostami has either completely silenced his soundtrack or come close to it, each time with a different agenda and impact. ‘Choosing silence’ is the main subject matter of one of Kiarostami’s short films in the fresh years after the 1979 revolution, The Chorus (1982). In complete silence, the initial credits appear on an empty sheet of music. Fade out, and cut to an empty alley and the sounds of a howling wind and an approaching horse-driven carriage. The sound of the horse trotting, its neck-bell clanging, and the carriage’s loose
wooden boards clanking, along with the crushing sound of the spinning of iron wheels on the asphalt and cobblestoned streets of a northern city in Iran increasingly ascend, and after what seems to be a madly rushing urban trip, the carriage reaches an old man who is indifferently strolling along the narrow alley. He is completely unaware of the sounds around him and pays no attention to the loud requests of the coachman to get out of the way. The next shot (Picture 4) shows us the reason: his hearing aid is out of his ear. Here, accompanying the image cut, there is an auditory cut to complete silence, and the audience is placed in the protagonist’s point of audition. However, this silence is not completely complete, and a very vague, very ‘thin’ remainder of all the previous sounds can still be heard upon attentive listening. The old man becomes finally aware by the gentle touch of the driver’s whip on his shoulder, gets out of the way, and then puts the aid back into his ear. On the soundtrack, the departing sound of the carriage goes to the background, and a sudden roar of thunder punctuates the man’s decision to ‘hear’.

The old man, then, goes to a sonically vibrant bazaar, finds a shoemaker – amazingly asleep on his seat in front of a coppersmith’s – and asks him to repair his shoe. But the sounds of the coppersmith’s and the relentless nagging of the shoemaker about the hardship of his life are beyond the old man. He simply takes his hearing aid off, and thankfully, we can now only hear a mellow humming in the background. Later, he puts it on, does his seemingly routine feeding of the pigeons and window shopping, goes home, and again chooses to suffocate the noises outside by taking off the hearing aid. But he forgets that his two grandchildren are coming home after the school. The girls ring the bell, and the old man (and us, the audio-viewers) cannot hear it. The girls start to chant ‘Grandpa, open the door’, and little by little, their schoolmates join them and together they make a chorus, which finally reaches the unaided ear of the old man, and makes him smile for the first time during the film. In the last ten minutes of *The Chorus*, we are alternately moving between inside and outside the old man’s house: Interior is his point of audition which, thanks to the intermissions between the turns of street drilling, is even more completely silent than the previous silences; and exterior is the realm of noise and the chorus of the children.

The voluntary silence of grandpa, while never completely complete, is still a rare case of using the limit of diegetic silence in the cinema. *The Chorus* is also a rare case in Kiarostami’s oeuvre, as it easily allows for political readings unlikely for a notoriously apolitical filmmaker. On the one hand, it is the first clear-cut introduction of Kiarostami’s personal philosophy of seeking shelter in silence amidst clamour - after the hints he gives in *The Report* (1978) and *The Solution No. 1* (1979) - and in nature and solitude (other versions of silence) in the Koker trilogy and *Taste of Cherry*. This philosophy of escape to silence suggests highly political connotations when
placed in the context of the production year. Historically (as we will see in the segment of political silence in the next chapter) The Chorus is made in the middle of what I call Kiarostami’s political period (1979 – 1984), which is three years after the Revolution and its bloody aftermath of executions and terrors and retaliations, shortly after the American hostage crisis, and during the third year of the horrible Iran-Iraq war (1980 – 1988). Considering all these, it is meaningful to see how Kiarostami manipulates his audience: By contrasting all those annoying and horrible noises of outside to a comfortable silence, and then making us listen from the old man’s point of audition and therefore aligning us with him, Kiarostami leads the audience to a level of identification, empathy or sympathy, with the old man. So, at the very least, his motivation for ‘choosing silence’ is justified.

On the other hand, The Chorus is an exception in all Kiarostami’s non-educational films where the content of the film contains a very concrete ‘message’: to conquer an old man’s deafness, what we need is a chorus of young people. I do not mean to reduce the film to a propaganda tool, but then again, considering the populist slogans of the time, and the frequent repetition of terms such as ‘alliance’, ‘unity’, and ‘solidarity’ both among the officials and the masses of a war-struck country, this simple message can bring out two different political readings: one that sees it as an enforcement of life and hope despite the hardship (also a major theme in the last two films of the Koker trilogy), and one that sees it as an act of opposition and protest to the deafness and silence of the official ‘powers’ in that critical period, which is something that again we can see seven years later, in his first rendition of the ‘false documentary’ period, Homework (1989).
In one of the few exterior sequences towards the end of *Homework*, the children are asked by the school officials to attend a religious ceremony in the schoolyard, which involves repeating what the school supervisor (as the master of the ceremony) sings and beating their chests with its rhythm. The children, being children and playful, do not do the ritual in an orderly and unified manner, and Kiarostami’s voice-over announces, “As a gesture of respect, we preferred to cut this part’s sound from the film’s soundtrack.” We listen to complete silence for one and a half minutes after that. The lie, or at the very least, cleverness of Kiarostami lies in the fact that he does not cut out the scene altogether, and we have no choice but to see the children being silenced by higher powers, whether the filmmaker or the school officials. Of course, the whole scene was censored in the film’s national release, which happened after the three-year ban of the film (Elena 66).

The more conspicuous political implications of complete silence in *The Chorus* and *Homework* should not overshadow their other functions. For example, due to the diegetic nature of the silence in *The Chorus*, unlike the one in *Homework*, it can also be read as a major narrative device, with the hearing aid as what drives the narrative of the drama; or an aesthetic choice, for which a meticulous orchestration of noises and voices is *contrasted* to the limit of cinematic silence on the soundtrack. In fact, these two aspects find significance in a similar diegetic complete silence in the peak of Kiarostami’s ‘fake documentary’ period, *Close-Up* (1990).

*Close-Up* is the story of a down and out religious cineaste in Tehran who pretends to be Mohsen Makhmalbaf, the iconic and later controversial Iranian filmmaker, and this way finds his way into the house of a wealthy family. In the end, they find out about his true identity, and
the police arrest him. Kiarostami’s ‘documentary-like’ narrative is structured around re-enactments of past-events as well as present-time conversations between himself and the people involved in this story. Towards the end of the film, the real Makhmalbaf goes to visit his freshly released double in front of the jail. We see the scene through a car window, and hear a conversation between Kiarostami and his cinematographer and sound recorder. Apparently something has gone wrong: due to the oldness of Makhmalbaf’s lapel mike they have “lost” the sound, and during the emotionally charged scene of the confrontation between the ‘original’ and the ‘copy’, we are just able to hear sporadic fragments of what they say to each other, punctuated by moments of complete silence.

In his audio-visual analysis of Close-Up, David T. Johnson admits that being deceived by the director’s off-screen lie that there was a real problem with the sound recorder, he found the accident “happy”, because now “the burden of answering film’s questions shifted from film to viewer” (290). In “Critical Hearing and the Lessons of Abbas Kiarostami”, Johnson lists the narrative and acoustic signs that reveal the pretence of documentary in the entire film, mainly by referring to the sounds of the courtroom, including Kiarostami’s again acousmatic voice which constantly interrupts the authority of the judge, and the defendant’s answers which are mostly addressed to him and his camera, making us be “no more or less sure if the trial is actually occurring” (Johnson 297). However, despite all these, the uncommon nature of complete silence still has the power of fostering the illusion of a non-fictional accident.

Kiarostami’s technique of complete silence in Close-Up led to various reactions by critics, who had no choice but to refer to his own contradictory interviews about his reasons. Elena points
out that the reason was either the uninteresting nature of the conversation to Kiarostami (90), or that the conversation was not related to the film at all (233); while Margulies ascribes it to the humanist nature of Kiarostami who did not want an unbalanced conversation between the knowing Makhmalbaf and the unaware (of being filmed) Sabzian (238-39). Whatever the reasons, the device of complete silence, according to Margulies, turns the scene into “an elaborate (and faux) cinema vérité” (238-39). On the same issue, Geoff Andrew writes,

The point, of course, is that it’s impossible to know anything for certain; there are things we’re not witness to, motives we cannot fathom, and lies that illuminate the truth. Close-Up is not only about lies; as a film attempting to do the impossible and reproduce reality, it tells plenty, too. But by acknowledging its own fallibility and falsehoods, it does in fact come a little closer to the truth.

(G. Andrew 27)

By lying to us, or in fact, by making us listen to an alternation of dialogue and complete silence, we are led to think about our own version of truth. The reflective quality of silence is also confirmed by Jonathan Rosenbaum who accepts the argument that “Kiarostami in Homework and Close-Up was deconstructing, or unpacking, the documentary form” (Gilberto Perez qtd in Rosenbaum 15), and asserts that the “creative use” of deceptiveness by Kiarostami in these two films has “a deliberate distancing effect,” which is “an invitation for the viewer to step back from a climactic scene and reflect” (14-15). So, beyond a mere technique for making false documentaries, it seems that the complete silence is at the core of Kiarostami’s thinking about the cinema, also justified in his own interviews.
In his conversation with Kiarostami, Jean-Luc Nancy relates the memory of a grey scene in *Hiroshima mon Amour* - an “image” of the void or a “hole in the film” (Nancy, *Evidence* 90) - that an audience member had mistaken for a power failure in the theatre. To that, Kiarostami answers: “These holes, these moments of ‘failure’ are what makes for the construction. That’s my dream” (Nancy, *Evidence* 90). On another occasion, answering Saeed-Vafa’s question about the process of attaining his “principles of ellipsis and omission,” Kiarostami answers, “when you see a film, you should come away with your own personal interpretation, based on who you are. The film should allow that to happen, make room for that interaction” (Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum 107). In fact, Kiarostami has frequently asserted that by not presenting everything to his audience, he tries to invite them to use their imagination so that they can actively participate in the process of creation. He refers to this mode as the “incomplete cinema” (Mirbakhtyar 142), “half-made film” (Mottahedeh 134), and “interactive cinema” (*10 on Ten*, Rezaei 36). By silencing some aspects of the multi-dimensional experience of film, Kiarostami both drives his audience to complete the film, and shows a philosophy that considers truth as more of a pluralistic concept rather than a definite existence. Dabashi defines the truth in Kiarostami’s cinema as one speaking to “a reality that needs re-defining,” and that “the actual realism of Abbas Kiarostami is particular about the terms relentlessly reducing reality to its ephemeral constituents” (Dabashi, *Makhmalbaf* 35; emphasis in the original). As we will see in the other kinds of cinematic silence, this power of silence in multiplying the truth through re-defining reality is not limited to the fake documentaries, or to the rare category of complete silence.
3.3 Partial Silences

In a way, all acoustic silences that are not completely empty soundtracks are partial; but here what I mean by the term is any kind of avoidance of aural elements on the soundtrack which are diegetic, and logically justified in the world of the film. Partial silences can be uncovered (UPS) and covered (CPS), with the former containing the least amount of noise and music, usually dictated by the principles of realism, and the latter dominated by music, noise, or even visual elements of *mise-en-scène* at the expense of silencing an expected segment of the sonic space.

3.3.1 UPS: Uncovered Partial Silence

Uncovered partial silence is a vocal silence not covered by music, noise, or visual aspects of *mise-en-scène*. Remember the ‘uncomfortable silence’ between the soon-to-be-arrested Sabzian and the bearded man in Ahankhah’s house in *Close-Up*, when Mr. Ahankhah leaves the living room and Sabzian looks uneasy and restless, partly because of this very silence. It is also the case in some of Kiarostami’s trademark ‘car sequences’. Generally, when Kiarostami’s drivers are alone, they do not feel the urge to talk to themselves, think out aloud, or turn their radio or CD player on. Even in lengthy fixed shots of conversing pairs in cars, there are some silent moments to enhance the effect of what Kiarostami calls the “fixation for concentration” (Nancy, *Evidence* 86).

This is a silence dictated by the norms of realism; something which cannot be questioned due to its stylistic nature. In fact, it is being fed from the same source that gives license to all the
eye-level single shots of characters talking or being talked to in almost all Kiarostami’s conversation scenes. Interestingly, in most of these two-person conversations, the goal is reaching this unobjectionable silence. In the first 18 minutes of the overall 20’ 30” length of the first section of Ten (2002), the boy (Amin) constantly complains to his off-screen mother that every time they are in the car she starts an argument, and that “[he doesn’t] want to listen [to her] anymore.” Consequently, the last section lasts only ninety three seconds, and has the least amount of dialogue between the mother and son: “Mother: ‘Hello.’ Son: ‘Take me to grandma’s.’ Mother: ‘Alright!’” Finally the son achieves his first demand: uncovered partial silence!

![Cinematic Diagram: Ten (Kiarostami, 2002): Scenes in relation to Duration and Repetition](Image taken from Munt)

3.3.2 CPS: Covered Partial Silences

As we saw in the previous chapter, Théberge’s ‘diegetic silences’ were those resulted from the prominence of another acoustic aspect of the film. Here, to make the distinction from the UPS more clear, I would rather to use the term ‘covered partial silences’ (CPS) to indicate silences covered by acoustic or visual elements of the film.
3.3.2.1 Noise CPS

One way to achieve CPS is the dominance of noises in the soundtrack, which relates the study of silence to an attentive mode of listening to noises, like the work of Coulthard in studying Haneke’s silences (discussed in chapter 2). Another example of this approach in studying CPS can be seen in Johnson’s interpretation of the ‘can-kicking’ scene in Close-Up. Early in the film, when the enthusiastic journalist goes into the house of the deceived family, the camera stays out and shows us the bored cab driver starting a conversation with the two officers before they go into the house. When alone, he takes dead flowers off a leaf pile and kicks an aerosol can. The camera follows the movement of the can with a smooth pan, “but the sound is so loud that we are made aware of that aural materiality. The loud sound breaks the relative silence that the scene has enjoyed” (Johnson 295). Contrary to the normal narrative applications of sound, Johnson maintains, “here, in a scene emptied of narrative drive, we are asked merely to perceive; we are asked to listen to this sound and consider it in its own right. What does an aerosol can really sound like? Like this” (296).

Noise CPS is used in many other Kiarostami’s films with different functions, such as the nocturnal sounds of animals in Five Dedicated to Ozu (2003), where the ambient sounds of ‘nature at night’ act as a kind of music; the church bell ringing in Certified Copy (2010), giving a certain ‘tone’ to the film; and the beginning and ending of First Case, Second Case (1979), in which noise turns into the main narrative drive and finds explicit political significance. In all these cases, CPS functions as either holes in the structure of the film and a separation from the sous le sense (into the meaning) direction to emphasize the evidence of the film (Nancy,
Evidence 70) – as we see in Johnson’s interpretation – or as carefully planted signs that give way to more traditional symbol-seeking analyses. Either way, noise CPS by “subjecting the listener to (…) noises” (Chion 57) raises various questions about its cause and reason, and also its relation to other forms of silence. For example, the can-kicking scene in Close-Up is also foregrounding a ‘narrative silence’ – which will be discussed in the next chapter – by allocating cinematic time to a de-centralised action, and finds further meaning in relation to two later scenes in the film: the same scene from the point of view of Sabzian, the impostor, this time with a doubled terrifying effect because of our memory of the silence; and the penultimate scene of the film when Sabzian and Makhmalbaf buy flowers for the deceived family: the dead flowers that the bored cab driver takes from the leaf pile can be the same flowers that the deceived family have already thrown out.

3.3.2.2 Music CPS

The second form of CPS occurs when the soundtrack fills with music. If we accept that music generally functions as an emotionally stimulating tool in film, it will not be surprising that Kiarostami has been fairly reluctant to use music in his works. However, both as a silencing tool and a tonal element, he has always benefited from an economical use of music throughout his entire career. An instrumental version of Beatles’ “Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da” silences the expected urban noises in the beginning of Kiarostami’s first film, The Bread and Alley, signalling a childhood lightness before the boy’s encounter with the dog. In his latest film, Like Someone in
Love, the old man plays Ella Fitzgerald’s titular song on his record player to prepare the loving mood he desires, and to hide his own awkwardness in facing the young prostitute.

The mood music can also be heard in the ‘freedom’ moments of The First Graders (1984) (the flight of a plastic bag in the air, and the outside-the-school-scenes of the disabled student, among others) and the ‘zigzag road’ shots in Where Is the Friend’s Home? (1987), where an exciting piece of music by Aminollah (André) Hossein was added, “only because of the pressures exerted by some of [Kiarostami’s] colleagues who had seen the film and believed that it needed some music in order to keep the viewer’s attention during the so-called lows” (10 on Ten, Rezaei 23). Kiarostami adds that these colleagues “were not totally wrong,” because “unfortunately viewers have become accustomed to gratuitous and misplaced things” (10 on Ten, Rezaei 23). We will shortly see (in the ‘music silence’ section) how Kiarostami manages to actually avoid this kind of music in most of his career after this point.

Music CPS is compellingly used in many Kiarostami’s finales, to evade a clear-cut answer to the main questions of the films. This function of the music is similar to the freeze-frame or the cut-to-black in some of his films. In fact, Kiarostami has used music CPS in the ending of all his long features after The Report, except Certified Copy (which again uses the church bells in the same way). This is another form of silence, then, which along with the euphoric and relaxing nature of the music (in pieces as varied as Vivaldi to Fitzgerald), also lets the audience contemplate more on what has just happened, and finish the film in their own way.
3.3.2.3 Audio/Visual Perspective CPS

What is missing from Théberge’s range of diegetic silences is that sometimes silence can be the result of a stylistic choice in the *mise-en-scène* or certain audio-visual perspectives. Basically, we accept the silence as a justified effect of the auditory perspective when characters are framed in long shots. In one of Kiarostami’s most silent films in terms of dialogue, *The Experience* (1973), such a CSP happens in the crucial moments of the film. Mamad, a troubled 14 or 15 year-old boy who lives and works in a photo studio, is experiencing love (for a wealthy young girl) and sexual desires (represented by a female mannequin in the store). After his boss finds out about the latter, Mamad’s brother goes to the store to talk to the boss and ask him to let Mamad stay there at night. Mamad sees the scene from behind a window, and the camera stays with him and does not let us hear what the adults are saying, though the gestures are eloquent enough: the boss reluctantly agrees.

A more significant case of CPS happens when Mamad decides to go to the girl’s parents and ask to work as a help in their house. But at the moment of this request, Kiarostami leaves the camera across the street, and we cannot hear what the girl’s mother and the boy are telling each other. The next cut to their medium two-shot makes us aware of her fake promise: “if you work well during the day, I’ll let you study at night.” By not acoustically showing Mamad’s hopeful act of bravery out of love, Kiarostami decreases the sentimentality of a melodrama of failure which peaks when the boy comes back in the afternoon and gets rejected by the girl herself: “They said we didn’t want [a help];” then, the sound of the closing door, and the start of a music CPS.
This visual coverage of acoustic silence can also be seen in the ending of *Through the Olive Trees* (1994). A few times throughout the film, the boy (Hossein) has proposed to the girl (Tahereh), and uselessly begged her to at least make a gesture so he knows whether to continue having hope or forget about her. In the last ten minutes of the film, we follow the chatty lover following his quiet beloved one and repeating his request for an answer. After a while, the lover and the camera both stay on the top of a hill for a moment. Then, Hossein takes a breath, puts his accessories down, and starts running down the hill, while the camera stays there and lets us see how he reaches Tahereh in the far distance, and after probably more talks, runs back towards the hilltop.

It is true that Cimarosa’s *Concerto for Oboe and Strings* is also being played on this scene, but what actually deprives the audience from hearing what has been said is the extreme long shot in which hearing the characters would be totally out of place. Once again, and this time by using the perspective CPS, Kiarostami eludes the task of narrative closure, and lets the audience decide for the fate of these characters. In fact, it seems that any answer that Kiarostami could
provide at this moment would have been unacceptable: the class conflict between the boy and
the girl is too big for us to simply accept a ‘happy ending’, and a straight ‘no’ from the girl would
have been too disappointing to the viewer of this vividly full-of-life movie.


### 3.4 Character/Dialogue Silence

Character/Dialogue silence happens when a character is seen but not heard in certain
situations. This is a type of silence most related to the kinds discussed in chapter 1, especially
conversational silence. The lack of words, or the absence of speech for a character, becomes a
character/dialogue silence only when the situation calls for the character to speak. According to
Bilmes, “conversation is a state of talk, a situation within which talk is relevant. It is only when
talk is relevant that we get conversational silence” (Bilmes 74). A prevalent kind of conversation in Kiarostami’s films is ‘question and answer’; sometimes in an interrogatory manner like in Homework and The First Graders and sometimes in the form of an interview like in Ten. In all these conversation scenes, there are characters who do not or cannot answer the questions addressed to them, because of an internal reason (The anxious boy in The First Graders), a contextual reason (Tahereh in Through the Olive Trees), or a mixture of both (the boys in First Case, Second Case).

In his analysis of the structure of Taste of Cherry, the Spanish Alberto Elena claims that the main three conversations of the film are alternated with “long and significant periods of absolute silence, deliberate pauses that give Taste of Cherry its slow and serious tempo, allowing the audience to reflect on what they have just heard” (124). Elena refers to a detailed analysis of the film’s structure as a proof (Table 2), originally done by Marco Dalla Gassa, a film instructor at Università Ca' Foscari Venezia and the Italian writer of a book on Kiarostami in 2000.

| Silence  | 08' 14" |
| Dialogue | 17' 35" |
| Silence  | 06' 42" |
| Dialogue | 16' 09" |
| Silence  | 05' 46" |
| Dialogue | 15' 08" |
| Silence  | 06' 06" |
| Dialogue | 01' 00" |
| Silence  | 10' 24" |

Table 2. Silence and Dialogue in Taste of Cherry (1997) (Dalla Gassa 173, qtd in Elena 124)
Although by silence, Elena and Dalla Gassa only mean the vocal, or at most, narrative silences, the overall result of their calculation is illustrative: 48’ 52” of dialogue (including the pauses) and 37’ 12” of silence (or simply scenes without speech). However, as we saw in chapter 1 and the works of the discourse-analysis pragmaticians (especially Tannen & Saville-Troike, and Ephratt), different kinds of pauses can also be functional types of eloquent silence. So I believe that a thorough mapping of character/dialogue silence should also include gaps, pauses, distractions, hesitations, and even repetitions in the process of dialogue utterance of a character (see also the discussion on Bruneau’s study of silence in chapter 1).

Furthermore, along with language silence (the next item in this chapter), character/dialogue silence is an attempt to alleviate the dictating force of speech in the cinema. In Audio-Vision, Chion introduces cinema as a “vococentric or, more precisely, a verbocentric phenomenon” (5). Dialogue, in its various forms, has long been the least blemished element of the sound film, and the attempts in its dethronement have mainly belonged to less mainstream styles of filmmaking, namely Art cinema. Chion’s list of the “techniques of relativizing speech in the sound film” includes rarefaction of speech, proliferation and ad libs, multilingualism and use of a foreign language, narrative commentary over dialogue, submerged speech, loss of intelligibility, and decentering speech in the structure of the film (178-83). Kiarostami’s strategic use of some of these techniques has been a recurrent principle in the backbone of his centrifugal cinema, evidenced by the ‘rarefaction of speech’ through the character/dialogue silence, and also ‘multilingualism’ and ‘loss of intelligibility’ through the language silence.
3.5 Language Silence

Language silence or the silence of language is one of the least analyzed aspects of Kiarostami’s cinema. Mumbling children of The First Graders and Homework and the elderlies of Where Is the Friend’s Home? and ABC Africa (2000), and the physical distances between characters that make the questioners repeat their question a few times (the woman’s question in Ten from her ex-husband, for example, in the beginning of the last section of Ten) comprise unintelligible pieces of dialogue. The extensive use of various dialects and accents, which are sometimes even indecipherable to Farsi speaking Iranians, depicts an ethnographic schema of the country, but also signifies the complexities of communication (sometimes between the audience and the character, and sometimes between the characters themselves). Iran’s northern accent in the Koker trilogy, Kurdish in The Wind Will Carry US, and Luri, Kurdish, Pashto, and Azeri in Taste of Cherry are some examples. There is a scene in Close-Up, where the son and the mother of Ahankhah family begin to speak in Azeri, and Kiarostami asks them to “speak in Farsi so we can understand too.” The variety of languages and communication breakdown reaches its climax in the multilingualism of ABC Africa (English, Farsi, and Ugandan languages) and Certified Copy (French, English, Italian), where the necessity of subtitles for almost every possible viewer makes the subtitle something more than an arbitrary option.

ABC Africa could serve as an ideal case study of language silence, making the statement that “some silences are obscured by words” (Bilmes 82) true. In most of the film, you cannot see characters’ faces while speaking (‘character/image silence’, which will be discussed in the next chapter). Even those interviewees whose faces are visible are silenced in a way or another, because either they are speaking in an unsubtitled language or are physically unable to speak.
clearly. Two examples are the ‘always happy’ old man in the thirteenth minute of the film who cannot explain the reason for his happiness, and the young man with a T-shirt picturing Eric Cantona (the French captain of Manchester United soccer club in the 1990s) whose only means of communication is repeating (or being repeated mendaciously by the editor) the words: “Eric Cantona! Eric Cantona, the King!” Another form of using language to silence a character in this film is a most amazing sound montage: With the accompaniment of some local music, the camera moves along an alley and spots a Ugandan woman leaning on a wall. The volume of the music decreases slightly and a dried voice is synchronized with the woman’s lips moving, speaking in Farsi: “You’re too deceitful! Too deceitful you are! So, finally you showed up. Do you still love me?” The fact that her line is not subtitled only reaffirms that this is artificially added to this ‘false documentary’, dubbed in a studio far from Uganda. Whatever the reasons behind this vocal manipulation (emphasis on the mixture of fiction and reality, animating the possibility of personal dramas in collective disasters, etc.), the effect of silencing a character’s voice by depriving her from her native language cannot be ignored.

3.6 Music Silence

By music silence I mean exactly what Théberge has already defined for his category of ‘musical silence’: the interruption or absence of music when its presence is expected (Théberge 60-62). Please note that music silence means the lack of the music, and is totally different from the ‘music CPS’ (music-covered partial silence) where the present music has a silencing effect.
Music silence is highly related to the expectations of the audience for hearing a piece of music based on the textual, intertextual, and extratextual relations of the film and the audience’s own experiences.

For example, given that the average cinemagoer is used to hearing music in temporal transitions (a music that fills the time and place gaps), the absence of music in the night-to-dawn single shots of *Taste of Cherry*, *The Wind Will Carry Us*, and *ABC Africa* provides a music silence that, along with the temporal condensation and the spatial fixation, meanings are formed inside an ostensible emptiness. A good textual example of this kind of silence is *Five*. Since the first four episodes end with music, our ‘textual’ expectation is to hear music by the end of the fifth episode too. The final music silence, though, could also be a result of the ‘intertextual’ habit of those audio-viewers familiar with the musical finales of Kiarostami’s works, and even possibly their ‘extratextual’ knowledge of Kiarostami’s many statements in this regard, suggesting that, “The stories of my films don’t have clear-cut endings. Therefore, I use a selected piece of music to help my viewer. I want to tell them, Watch out! The film is coming to an end” (*10 on Ten*, Rezaei 25).

### 3.7 Conclusion: The Diagram of Acoustic Silences and The Case of *Taste of Cherry*

As you can see in the following diagram of cinematic acoustic silences, partial silences, not surprisingly, take up the biggest space. Add to this list, the gaps, pauses, distractions, and repetitions and you have an extensive system of silences at work both in Kiarostami’s films in particular, and in the cinema in general. In the final section of this thesis, I will elaborate on the
various powers of the silences introduced here and in the following chapter. However, one minor conclusion could be the possibility of using these types of silence for a quantitative analysis of certain films; one like what Dalla Gassa/Elena did for *Taste of Cherry*, but more detailed and based on a theoretically formulated schema.

Such an analysis would hold, for example, that *Taste of Cherry* actually starts with a noise CPS and ends with a music CPS. The urban noises of the streets in the first few minutes and the
multitude of off- and on-screen accented voices of the labourers unintelligibly proposing their services to the silent driver compose a partial silence covered with noises and words (language silence). The off-screen voices (character/image silence, detailed in the next chapter) continue throughout the film, especially during the three main in-the-car conversations with the Kurdish soldier, the Afghan seminarian, and the Azeri employee of the Museum of Natural History whom the protagonist wants to convince to either bury his dead body the following day or rescue him in case his suicide attempt is unsuccessful. Of course, these conversations lead to a variety of character/dialogue silences too. Furthermore, until the last sequence of the film, there is no non-diegetic music (music silence), and when alone, the main character is either driving quietly (that is, without talking to himself or turning his car’s radio or CD player on) or observing his environment (roads, dust, sunset) (uncovered partial silence). These relative silences come to a climax in the next to last sequence of the film.

After a fade out to darkness (following Badii’s gaze at the sunset), there is a cut to the long shot of Mr. Badii in his apartment. Fixed across the street, the camera shows us Badii restlessly walking in a perspective CPS (we do not hear the sounds he makes in his apartment). Then, he gets in the cab, which announces its arrival by short honks, and goes to the grave he has previously dug for himself outside the city. The cab leaves, Badii sits straight smoking a cigarette and looking at the skyline of the city at night, and then goes and lies in his grave. The only source of light is now the moonlight, and the only sounds are of the wind, the occasional thunder, and a dog barking far way. Then, we see the reaction shot of the man’s gaze: the game of the moon and clouds, light and darkness. Back to his close-up in the grave, now completely in darkness except for the sporadic lightning that lets us catch a glimpse.
The variety of acoustic silences paired with the visual and narrative minimalism endows this sequence with an ambiguous quality that gives way to different interpretations. For example, an Iranian critic praises the relation between the silence and darkness and the feeling of ‘death’ in close to 10 minutes near the end of the film (Aqiqi 34), and in contrasts, Godfrey Cheshire sees the scene as an enforcement of life:

In its penultimate scene, when the figure we’ve identified all along is lying completely still, apparently heading into a darkness both literal and figurative, we’re left utterly alone with ourselves, with our own deepest feelings about the profoundly simple thing that, above all, this film wants us to sense, to savor, to taste: life.

And nothing more.

(Cheshire)

In these two readings of the same sequence, the former sees death in the scene, and the latter finds life. This must be the ideal of Kiarostami’s interactive cinema: He manages to elicit different and even contradictory responses from his viewers by using some powerful silences, and makes the viewers participate in the creation of the story and the film. So, his job is done, and now he can rest with his film crew and actors, and give us the pleasure of watching some colourful, ostensibly raw footage of behind the scenes, enriched with a music-covered partial silence: an instrumental version of Louis Armstrong’s ‘St. James Infirmary’. The example of Taste of Cherry effectively shows how silence can assume a transcendental power in the context of an art film, making the cinema a ground for polyvocality.
I don’t believe a film is to be understood. Do we understand a piece of music? Do we understand a painting, or the exact meaning of a poem? It’s ambiguity that attracts us to a work, not understanding the subject or the story. However, human beings are standing between heaven and hell because of their existential ambiguity, and art displays this ambiguity. Pascal said that you cannot show a single event in somebody’s life and claim to have said everything about him. The secret department of the soul prevents this, and this is what becomes the plinth, the basis, of the art of cinema. I believe we can make the viewer experience mental effort by using omission. (S)he can become involved in the making of the film through her/his imagination. For the creative viewer this involvement is more interesting than false climaxes, or the plain and ridiculous guessing games. Once again I would like to quote Bresson who said, “We create not by adding, but by subtracting.” This is exactly the opposite of resorting to symbols, allegories, and signs. And once again I would like to quote Nietzsche who said, “That which is truly deep, needs a mask.” I believe one can find out more about the power of cinema through omission rather than through the extensive use of tools and technical capabilities.

( Abbas Kiarostami, 10 on Ten)
4.1 Meta-Silence

The notion that we might perceive a phenomenon through a seemingly irrelevant sensation is not a new concept. Not only poets and fiction writers have touched people with their eyes and enjoyed different tastes with their noses, but even philosophers and psychoanalysts have used the same cross-modal view for proving their own points. The inter-relation of modalities in perception and cognition of the world has been extensively researched by cognitivists such as Lawrence E. Marks, who over-simplifies the thesis of *The Unity of the Senses* (1978) as such: “Different senses often assist one another in the perception of objects and events. Different senses often share common phenomenological attributes” (ix). Also, as we saw in chapter 2 and Chion’s notion of *acousmêtre*, there are some ghost or phantom perceptions as a result of a phenomenological transference between different senses; a kind of ‘absent presence’, if you will, or a communicative silence, as argued in the first chapter.

Three pragmatic examples in art studies are also compiled in Jaworski’s *Silence: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (1997). In “Silence in Painting: Let Me Count the Ways,” Marcia Hafif argues that like poetry and music, painting can be silent in various ways in terms of the silence of the artist, the audience, and the work itself (for example, its colour). In “Silence and Communication in Art,” Stacie Withers claims that “certain works of art are silent because they appeal to the spirit rather than to the mind” (351), and goes on to elaborate on the exclusive characteristics of such “ambiguous” and silent paintings as Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa* (c. 1502). Finally, in “Silence across Modalities,” Alina Kwiatkowska sees a visual silence (and consequently a narrative and character/image one as well) in René Magritte’s painting *L’Homme au Journal (Man with a Newspaper, 1928)*, made possible by a reverse of the distinction between the figure and the
ground. In another case, and in an epistemological discourse, Žižek too writes about Carvaggio’s *Testa di Medusa* (1597) and Edvard Munch’s *The Scream* (1893) as the examples of cries that are “stuck in the throat” (93-94) in his “‘I Hear You with My Eyes’; Or, the Invisible Master” (1996).

![Picture 11. Silence in Magritte’s *L’Homme au Journal* (1928)](image-url)
However, I do not mean to limit myself to trans-sensorial manifestations of silence in the cinema. I believe that through an extended notion of silence, in an interdisciplinary and pragmatic framework (discussed in the first chapter), we can benefit from the metaphorical function of silence as the meaningful absence of an expected element in cinematic ‘silence studies’. Not only such a concept is not bound to acoustics, but it also goes beyond the merely visual studies of frames, and can integrate all the interpretive processes of reading a film; hence, the term ‘meta-silence’. Meta-silence is actually a meta-acoustic, eloquent, and formal part of the communicative art, which is tightly related to minimalism. Rejecting the claims on the depressed and cold mode of the arts “cultivating the metaphoric silence” and “constructing ‘minimal’ forms,” Sontag finds in them “vigorous, often tonic choices” of the artists who make their work resonant by an eloquent silence (Sontag 10). Meta-silence, then (as both silence as a metaphor and μετά-silence, meaning a situation beyond what we conventionally consider as the concept of silence) is simultaneously an artistic consequence of minimalism, and its philosophical condition. So, although this concept might seem so broad that can even include the usual conceptions of acoustic silence, it is actually circumscribed by the rules of minimalism, which are basically ‘selection’ and ‘condensation’. To avoid another lengthy theoretical discussion on various approaches to minimalism in art (which is necessary but probably too detailed to be minimized here), let me illustrate what I mean through examples from some intrinsically soundless arts.
4.2 Meta-Silence in Kiarostami’s Poems and Photographs

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Abbas Kiarostami is an excellent case for this study, thanks to both his experiments in arts and literature and his eloquence on his minimalist approach. All Kiarostami’s poems and photos follow the same rules of meta-silence. To Geoff Andrew, Kiarostami’s poems, similar to his photography and to his cinema, are often concerned with “acts of seeing and hearing,” and “the relationship between visibility and invisibility” (77); completely evidenced in this example from The Wind and the Leaf: “In the morning fog / the tree in my house yard / visible and invisible” (225), or more subtly in this one from Walking with the Wind: “A white foal / emerges through the fog / and disappears / in the fog” (17).

Kiarostami’s poems, short and haiku-like, often foreground an aspect (an image, a feeling, a sound, a message) while giving explicit or implicit clues about another silenced element, like this condensed image from the titular poem of one of his poem collections: “A Wolf / lying in wait” (55), or the questions raised by this poem itself: “A passerby’s footprints in the snow- / gone on an errand? / Is [s/]he coming back? / This way?” (Kiarostami, Walking with the Wind 19). Like the interactive function of the acoustic silences in his films, the meta-silence of the poems can lead to arousing the reader’s curiosity. Take the example of this poem: “One of the nuns / said something / The rest broke / into loud laughter” (Kiarostami, Walking with the Wind 118). The silenced elements here are abundant: There is a joke that we do not hear (or read), and a consequent laughter which is loud, but then again we cannot actually hear (or see). We do not know who these nuns are; whether they are young or old; what exactly they are wearing; how many they are; where this thing is happening; whether it is acceptable for them
to break into loud laughter; and many other questions which are triggered by this imagistic poem.

The same rules of meta-silence are at work in Kiarostami’s selections from the poetry of famous Iranian poets of the 13th and 14th centuries (Rumi, Saadi, and Hafiz) and the 20th century (Nima Youshij). Meticulously, Kiarostami takes an entire ghazal, masnavi, or she’r-e no (some of the most popular Farsi poetic forms), and summarizes its essence in a few words taken, and sometimes reconfigured, from the original text. He explains: “My theory is very simple. I suggest that apart from the pattern and form of a ghazal [usually between five to twelve couplets, or ten to twenty four hemistiches] we can summarize the concept, meaning, and the message of each ghazal in one hemistich, and by understanding this very hemistich you can understand the meaning of the whole ghazal” (Rouhani, “Hafiz, Saadi, Rumi, Ahmadi, and Others” 96). As Kiarostami himself elaborates in this interview, rather than ‘omission’, what he does in these ‘readings’ is a process of condensation and selection, much like what he does in the process of making a film like Shirin (2008). Kiarostami’s main reasoning for this approach is cleverly stated in the “instead-of-a-preface” epigraphs to each of these books, clearly showing the roots of his predilection for minimalism. In the beginning of Hafiz According to Kiarostami, he quotes Arthur Rimbaud: “Il faut être absolument moderne” (One must be absolutely modern) (-1); In Saadi: A Cry from Oneself, he quotes Saadi: “For the time demands / abridge it Saadi / for you truly did / what was your best” (3); In Fire in Wind: A Detail from the Shams Whole, he quotes Rumi: “Temper wants something new / all the time new / Something new wants on the road / someone new” (9); and in the beginning of Water: Nima Youshij, he quotes
Nima: “If I hid one from the thousand / don’t you doubt in the thousand/ and if in the body of my tale, nothing’s proper / the tale is just words, one should find the points” (7).

Minimalism, of course, is not a newly-found concept to Kiarostami. In another interview in 2000, he asserts that, “Minimalism is my ideal, and the current life styles basically lead us towards that. This movement towards minimalism is visible everywhere, from people’s make up and clothing to bigger things. Naturally, film cannot be indifferent to this tendency. It’s a necessity” (Tabe’Mohammadi 42). Kiarostami’s photos, exhibited all around the world, but also published in three collections, showcase a minimalistic view based on what he calls ‘simplification’: an abstract process of graphic interference that through omission and addition seeks to elevate simple nature photography to a state of art (AmirHajebi 104). By the end of his extensive analysis of Kiarostami’s photos, Eric Nakjavani suggests that they could be called “the landscapes of absence” (46), and Geoff Andrew, again, sees a relation between their patterns of “repetition, rhyme and concealment” and Kiarostami’s cinema (75).

Using the concealing whiteness of snow in the black and white collection of Snow White (2005); selecting only an incomplete part of trees (like only one leaf on a tree trunk) and the play of light and shadow in Trees and Crows (2008) (a collection in which there is no photo with plural forms of trees and crows in the same frame); and filling the frame with only part of a wall and focusing on a foregrounded shadow or plant captured on the wall in the Wall (2010) are all representations of meta-silence in these photos. As the next three pictures show, in different ‘poetic’ ways but with the same self-reflexive and yet self-effacing application of minimalism, these photos forcefully incite the imagination and curiosity of the viewer, giving us only the two
choices of either abandoning the act of viewing or engaging with the images on a deeper, more personal level. The following examples, in my opinion, prove Yusef Eshaqpor’s claim in his foreword to *the Wall* that, “the frame reveals real objects that exhibit a ‘desire for the invisible’, ‘desire for the inaccessible’” (14).

Picture 12. Is this a photo of a few trees in a snowy ground, or are the trees included only for us to see the image of snow? The choice is ours (Kiarostami, *Snow White* 10)
Picture 13. The play of light and shadow, and black and white; a lone tree depicted impartially; and an invitation to stop under the full-circle shadow of the tree before it goes away (Kiarostami, *Trees and Crows* 17)

Picture 14. Suffocation of the image by narrowing down the framework, and forcefully directing the gaze to stop at one point (Kiarostami, *the Wall* 41)
4.3 Kiarostami on Kiarostami: Authorial Silence

The philosophy behind all these artistic endeavours is further articulated in Kiarostami’s video arts, installations, and experimental films such as Roads (2006) and Correspondences (2008). However, rather than being dependent on the aesthetics exclusive to each of these forms, I argue that meta-silence, in its various manifestations, is also the dominant principle in Kiarostami’s more narrative films, including his recent experiences in Italy (the 2010 feature Certified Copy and the 2011 short No), and Japan (the 2012 Like Someone in Love).

Having said that, a reading of Kiarostami’s own descriptions of his favourite or ideal cinema during the past ten to twenty years might call into question any attempt in analyzing his works from only one viewpoint or under a single umbrella term. Furthermore, it seems that Kiarostami’s trajectory has been uneven and multilateral, if not full of incongruence and paradoxes, insomuch that even the existence of a single, consisting principle in his oeuvre is in doubt. Before arguing against these claims and drawing further conclusions, let us have a brief and chronological review of some of Kiarostami’s comments:

At a conference in Paris in 1995:

I believe in a cinema which gives more possibilities and more time to its viewer... a half-fabricated cinema, an unfinished cinema that is completed by the creative spirit of the viewer, [so that] all of a sudden, we have a hundred films.

(Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum 28-29)
In a conversation with Jean-Luc Nancy in 2001:

It’s necessary to envision an unfinished and incomplete cinema so that the spectator can intervene and fill the void, the lacks (…)

Without this third gaze [of the viewer, not the two conversing characters] the two other ones don’t exist. How to put it- No creator without creatures!

(Nancy, Evidence 88 & 92)

“Statement on Ten”, originally published in the press book for Ten, at the 2002 Cannes Film Festival (After recounting Kundera’s story of his father’s two words before death (It’s strange!) and how these words could be the essence of that character’s life experience):

This film is my own “two words”. It sums up almost everything. I say “almost” because I’m already thinking about my next film. A one-word film perhaps.

(Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum 125)

In the last part of Making of 5 (2003):

Definitely, I think that one-word cinema may be the end of the line and we are at a dead end. I cannot imagine defining cinema in half a word (…) I would like to finish with a line of poetry: “I’m standing where the road forks / Return is the only way that I know.”

(Rezaei 55)
In the 9th episode of 10 on Ten (2004):

I’ve never been a metteur-en-scène, and I’ve never realized or materialized anything, never been a réalisateur.

(Rezaei 33)

In an interview with Omid Rouhani on Like Someone in Love (2012):

In its traditional definition, director means the god of the scene, means metteur-en-scène, means giving mise-en-scène, setting people in space, but now with this style of hand-held camera everything is delegated to the cinematographer (...) I decided to give importance to the movements, to the setting of people, and go back to the mise-en-scène.

(Rouhani, “Love” 116)

As these quotations show, one might be able to divide Kiarostami’s works into the pre-2000 films and his notion of the half-made, unfinished, and incomplete cinema in which, as he later amended, the goal is “the omission of the director’s imposition” (HasaniNasab 105), and the 21st century films in which the position of the director is stressed. If the agenda behind the first period is reaching a cinema which seeks to show without showing (Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum 114), in the second period the goal is going back to a theatrical representation. In both cases, though, what is at stake is providing the possibility of free choices for the viewer, and hiding the order, or the authority of the director, in different ways.
This ‘authorial silence’ is in fact more subtle and ‘implied’ in Kiarostami’s post-2000 films. This period includes such “two-word” films as *ABC Africa* (2000) and *Ten* (2002); “one-word” films that begin with *Five* (2003) and develop into some self-explanatory works (with the presence of the image and/or the voice of the director himself) such as *Making of Five* (2003), *10 on Ten* (2004), and *The Roads of Kiarostami* (a project sponsored by Koreans Green Foundation to commemorate the 50th anniversary of atomic attacks against Japan, which is in fact a rendition of Kiarostami’s photos accompanied by his poetry and selected music); and a retreat to the classic “metteur-en-scène” conception of a filmmaker in *Certified Copy* and *Like Someone in Love*. The dilemma in these films is that, in spite of placing special weight on the role of the filmmaker, the director’s manipulations in the representation of reality should be concealed in a way that does not dictate a single reading of the films. Kiarostami’s main strategy for this goal is exploiting an extensive use of meta-silence (more than acoustic silences), derived from an essentialist view towards art which aims for reaching the authenticity of the artistic essence of each form. In other words, Kiarostami is always obsessed with the question, ‘what is art?’, and to answer that, he engages in subtracting different elements of each art form (poetry, photography, cinema) to extract the residue in the end. Of course the impression of this essentialist view is felt more in avant-garde and experimental films, but his maturity and ambition as an artist now seeks to find the answer in even more conventional conceptions of art. Let me make this point clear with an example from his latest film, *Like Someone in Love*.

The story elements of the film are similar to many mainstream popular movies all around the world: a love triangle with misfit sides. The main characters are a young uneducated mechanic with a strong sense of family honour, his girlfriend who is a sociology student but also has a
secret identity as a prostitute, and an eighty-something intellectual who is a retired sociology professor and also a writer and translator. All these people, especially the old man, want to be ‘like someone in love’, and that is why the old man wants to spend a romantic night with the girl, the girl does not break up with the violent boy, and the boy wants to get married to this ‘lying bitch’! Complicated characterization, well-designed dialogue, and an extended role-playing (the girl and the old man facing the boy) are some other attractions that do not leave much room for the kind of improvisations or unconventional manipulations of the sounds or images typical to Kiarostami’s early works.

Yet, this is not a regular, exciting genre movie. In a way, despite all these factors, there is a peculiar oddity in the structure of the film: Kiarostami takes all these entertaining elements and sets them in a composition devoid of the so-called rules of cinematic storytelling as screenwriting gurus like Syd Field or Robert McKee would suggest. In other words, there are no plot points in the film; no beginning, no climaxes, no midpoint, and no ending - at least, not in any conventional way. Other than this ‘rendition of a pulp fiction in a boring way’, like in Certified Copy and even The Report, there is a main question halfway through the film with two possible answers that can lead to two completely different readings of the film. Did the old man sleep with the young girl or not?

After the old man finally switches off the lights at his apartment and goes to the bedroom where the young girl is already lying in (or sleeping), there is a transition to the next morning, and the image of the old man driving and the girl sleeping in the car. This is one of the rare moments in Kiarostami when we can see both in-the-car characters in one shot from the other
side of the windshield, which also reflects the image of the clouds. At first, it seems that there is no sound, but then a gradually increasing non-diegetic drone, a kind of dull hum, replaces the expected sounds of a bustling city like Tokyo. As Fran Tonkiss argues in “Aural Postcards,” the silence of cities is “strangely arresting” and “evocative” as “it gains its quality from a larger geography of sound” (308). In an interview with Daniel Kasman, Kiarostami explains that “This is the sound of a happy morning. Of when you can feel satisfaction or happiness or something, some kind of joy on the man's face, also the way the clouds reflect on the windshield. But there is also something of the sound that carries some individual joy” (Kasman). But what does this sound of joy, this ‘sound of love’ really imply? Has the experience of being like someone in love really successful? How should we interpret, then, his next role-playing for the young boy as the girl’s grandfather? It seems that the music-covered partial silence (CPS) in this scene, not only covers the sounds of the city, but silences a truth which is itself never a clear concept: love.

This whole issue is strangely reminiscent of Richard Maltby’s famous essay in Post-Theory, where the possible readings of a three and a half seconds of Casablanca (Michael Curtiz, 1942) are examined in which a dissolve from Rick’s room to an exterior shot and then a dissolve back to the room might suggest that Rick and Ilsa have had “a brief romantic interlude.” There are signs for both readings, in this case imposed by the Production Code and also the norms of the classical Hollywood cinema, that put the audience “in the position of inventing a movie’s narrative as the film passes before them” (454). In Like Someone in Love, in a place and time that even showing an unequivocal sex scene would have been completely accepted to the modern audience, meta-silence hides this part of the narrative to both emphasize the ambiguity of love (a main theme in both films), and once again empower the viewer. There are
of course other unanswered questions in this film (why all the old man’s students that we see have become pimps and gangsters? Why don’t his daughter and granddaughter ever come to visit the old man? What was the “terrible accident” happened to the old man’s wife according to the neighbour?) but none of these are as crucial in our understanding and interpretation of the film. Somewhere near the end of the film, the old man’s publisher calls and asks him about a missing line in his under-print book: “Man endowed with little experience...” We never get to hear the rest of that line, and we never get to know the answer to that question, but in the cinema of meta-silence, whether classical or experimental, less is always more. And that might be the reason that the true nature of the relationship between the man and the woman of Certified Copy is never revealed, and why we never see whether the protagonist of The Report actually asked for a bribe or not. We are men endowed with little experience!

Picture 15. Are the couple of Certified Copy (2010) really married or are they just role-playing?
After this long but necessary argumentative introduction, the rest of this chapter will address four of the main categories of meta-silence, which are visual, character/image, narrative, and political silences. Of course there can be more forms of meta-silence in the cinema in general, but these four (which I will try to define and exemplify succinctly) are some of the major kinds in the cinema of Abbas Kiarostami.

4.4 Visual Silence

Basically anything seen through a camera limits the view of a spectator’s to what’s visible through the lens, which is always much less than [what] we can see with our own eyes. No matter how wide we make the screen, it still doesn’t compare to what our eyes can see of life. And the only way out of this dilemma is sound.

(Kiarostami qtd in Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum 114)

Since its inception, cinema has been based on the relation between still images and intermissions of total blackness; hence the term moving pictures. In other words, in the traditional 24 frames per second of images on actual films, we also have 24 frames of absolute darkness that our eyes would receive but our minds could not process. Furthermore, there is blackness in some editing transitions, namely in fade outs (visible) and cuts (visible when it is a cut to darkness and invisible when it is a cut to another image), and also black screens in some initial and ending credits. Of course digitalization changed this schema considerably, but visual silence is still recognizable in some films, including and especially in the modes of Art Cinema. Visual silence (or, more precisely, visual meta-silence) is the absence, lack, or hide-out of
images in frames, which similar to its acoustic counterpart can be either complete (black frame) or partial (semi-dark frames, and absence of expected images).

4.4.1 Complete Visual Silence

The main examples for the complete visual silence are the aforementioned penultimate sequence of *Taste of Cherry* (which is also, according to Nancy, “a black picture or a picture of blackness” that could be “of night or of death” and in the service of “the force of evidence”) (Nancy, *Evidence* 44), moments in the famous subterranean scene in *The Wind Will Carry Us* (when the reporter goes down to the dark underground cowshed to ask for fresh milk), and the most salient of them all, a seven-minute darkness in *ABC Africa*, supposedly a documentary made about the “Uganda’s Women’s Efforts to Save Orphans.”

After receiving an invitation from the “International Fund for Agricultural Development” (IFAD), an agency of the United Nations, Kiarostami and his cinematographer take their small digital cameras and go for ten days of location scouting and idea finding pre-production, and when they comeback, Kiarostami edits the footage and renders a strange film about life and death in the time of AIDS, Malaria, and civil war. Halfway through the film, following an off-screen conversation between Kiarostami and his cinematographer on the differences of dying from AIDS and from the unfortunate sting of the Malaria conveying mosquito, we hear the voice of their production manager who announces it is midnight and the time for nightly blackout. The lights go off, and Kiarostami and the cinematographer start to walk towards their hotel rooms in an almost total darkness. We just hear their discontinuous talk, the sounds of their footsteps
and opening the door, and then a complete visual silence (and an uncovered partial acoustic silence) which finally breaks with the roar of thunder and a lightning that lights up a lonely tree, exposed through the frame of a window.

If the sequence in the last minutes of *Close-Up* deceitfully introduces itself as an extra-diegetic forced silence, this sequence in *ABC Africa* does the same with the image, and renders a blackout whose carefully contrived nature could be revealed by close examination. As Geoff Andrew notes, “It’s not just the fast dawn that suggests this scene may not be ‘documentary’ at all; is it sheer coincidence that whoever was in the room left a camera turned on towards a window in such a way that, when the lightning comes, it records a perfectly framed tree (a favourite Kiarostami symbol)?” (34) In an endnote, Andrew proves his point in another way too: “Kiarostami has admitted to the author that (...) what we see/hear [in that scene] is actually a dramatic reconstruction” (82). Of course the short length of the static part of the shot, from the placement of the camera to the dawn after, could be another obvious signifier. Both of these diligently fabricated outages (in *Close-Up* and in *ABC Africa*) function as white lies of a ‘fake documentary’, to make us believe that what we are witnessing is the reality captured by the camera.

In an interview, Kiarostami himself admits that the function of darkness in *ABC Africa* and *The Wind Will Carry Us* is identical, and adds that, “I think the image recovers its meaning when it faces darkness, just as light does. In the darkness we arrive at an image through sound - an image which is based on our own experience and which therefore differs with each viewer” (Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum 117). The complete visual silence in *ABC Africa* has a doubly
optimistic consequence, then: not only does it remind us that there will be light after darkness, but gives us the hope that there can be darkness in the ever bright digital cinema as well, to maintain the opportunities coming up with this kind of meta-silence. Just as the sunlight is highly important in the lives of the Ugandans, darkness and its contrast to light is deeply significant in the construction of a movie, even if the movie is not recorded on the celluloid film.

4.4.2 Partial Visual Silence

Partial visual silence can take different forms based on the style of the cinematography, the source of lighting, and the characters or objects that are being visually silenced. There is of course an overlap between the visual silence of a character (like the well-digger and his fiancée’s faces in *The Wind Will Carry Us*) and the character/image silence which I will address in the next section. An example of a non-human visual silence in the frame is the hole/grave that Mr. Badii has dug for himself in *Taste of Cherry* and while recurrently asking his potential buriers to take a look at it, we do not get to see it until he actually lies in there. The moments in *The Wind Will Carry Us*’ subterranean scene and *ABC Africa*’s blackout sequence which are not totally black are also examples of partial visual silence as a result of natural low-key lighting by a small lantern or even a matchstick (pictures 12 and 13). Another example from *The Wind Will Carry Us* - a film that, according to Mulvey, is “as much about what is not said and what is not shown” Mulvey, *The Wind* 63) - is the night to dawn moment which is one of the many forms of manipulation of time in this film.
Another extensive example of partial visual silence is the last episode of *Five*: For twenty seven minutes we see the surface of water in a pond (or a lake), occasionally illuminated with the reflection of the moon, and instead of seeing, we just hear various sounds of nocturnal animals until the dawn.

Rather than limiting our experience of a film, meta-silence can broaden it by calling forth our other senses. What Michael Bull and Les Back write in their introduction to *The Auditory Culture Reader* is the essence of the function of visual silence in the cinema, either complete or partial:

> The reduction of knowledge to the visual has placed serious limitations on our ability to grasp the meanings attached to much social behaviour, be it contemporary, historical or comparative. Joachim-Ernst Berendt in his extraordinary book, *The Third Ear*, argues that the dominance of ‘The Eye’ limits our imagination and he suggests that human experience can only be accounted for through what he calls a ‘a democracy of the senses’ (Berendt 32).

(Bull and Back 2)
4.5 Character/Image Silence

I believe that when we don’t see things in their full details, their impact is stronger; their impressions last longer. It also gives the audience an opportunity to use their imagination: by just hearing the sound they can see the images in their creative mind without actually seeing them on the screen. This is actually an invitation for the spectators to participate in the creation of a work.

(Kiarostami qtd in Parhami)

An extension of visual silences, character/image silence is the other extreme of character/dialogue silence. However, it should be studied separately because of its subversive significance in film as a visual form: We usually expect to see the characters who are acting (speaking) or re-acting (are spoken to). This kind of meta-silence is achieved, then, when a character, partially or totally, is hidden in or excluded from the frame. This silence also can be momentarily (the character’s image is revealed sometime before or after the moment of silence) or all throughout the film.

In Film, A Sound Art, Chion makes note of Kiarostami’s technique of “side by side” shots of the conversing characters in a car (separating the characters in single shots rather than the unrealistic two-shots), and argues that this cinema is “a terrain for refiguring human conversation and getting out of the vicious circle whereby the image is automatically undermined by speech and vice versa” (364). This aesthetic choice for Kiarostami has the effect of audience participation (as noted in the initial quote of this section) while avoiding judgement. Answering Geoff Andrew about his reason for not showing Mania’s face until late in the first segment of Ten, Kiarostami admits that, “I felt that any mother in the audience would
be able to understand her; they wouldn't judge her by her appearance. I really don't want viewers to judge my characters, which is why sometimes I don't show them at all. Just hearing them can be enough” (G. Andrew 43-44).

These car riders whose faces we do not see at the exact moment of their turn of speech are temporary *acousmatic* voices, but there are also many cases of the voices of *acousmêtre* in Kiarostami’s cinema (for a definition of *acousmêtre* see chapter 2). The acousmêtre becomes visualized in some cases, such as the roles that Kiarostami himself plays as the director who can appear at any moment in the film, especially in *Homework* and *Close-Up*, or remains unseen, such as the prostitute in the sixth section of *Ten* whose face is never shown to us because the camera is fixed on the profile of the driver (Mania). Finally, the most excessive type of character/image silence is the total absence of the voice and image of a character whose existence is accepted via other narrative signs in the film; that is, an audio-visual absence: Ahmadpour brothers in *And Life Goes on...* are an example of this version of character silence.

*The Wind Will Carry Us* is an excessive mix of all these types of character/image silence, which lead to a re-definition of cinematic space altogether. The film is basically the story of a reportage group who go to a remote village to cover the mourning ritual of its inhabitants for the death of an old woman expected to die any minute. There are characters in the film that we do not see at first but get to see them finally, such as the protagonist, Behzad, and the school teacher (whose coming into the car and starting to talk before we see his face is reminiscent of the school teacher in *Through the Olive Trees*); characters who have voices but no visualized bodies, such as Behzad’s crew and the well-digger up on the graveyard hill; characters with
voices whose bodies are either hidden or covered, such as the well-digger’s fiancée in the subterranean cowshed and the hidden people behind the huge piles of hay (reminiscent of their counterparts in *Where Is the Friend’s Home*?); characters with no voice and body but in direct communication with the protagonist, such as Behza’d supervisor (Ms. Goudarzi) and also his wife on the phone with him; and finally a character whom we do not see or hear and has no connection to the other seen and heard characters, but her presence is the main drive of the whole film: the old lady whose death the reportage group is awaiting.

To Michael M. J. Fischer – who sees everything in Kiarostami’s works through a filter of symbolism, cultural connotations, and metaphors – Kiarostami’s non-visualized characters are related to “a deep play with what is *ghayeb*,” which is a master term in Shi’ism (242), referring to the twelfth and hidden Imam (leader) who is the truth himself and is to re-appear in the promised apocalypse. However, this association seems to be too far-fetched and the filmmaker’s main policy during the years after the 1979 revolution (escaping from the masses – in a society where everything is doubly theo-politicized – and seeking shelter in the companionship of individuated strangers) along with the explicit references to Khayyám’s poetry in the film should warn us against such simplistic oriental generalizations. Near the end of the film, in a beautiful long shot and with an echoed voice, the motorcycle-riding doctor who is giving a ride to Behzad, relates a quatrain from Khayyám - the Iranian poet and philosopher of the 11th and 12th century, famous for his equivocal mysticism and agnostic hedonism - in response to Behzad’s provocative line that ‘they say that the other world is more beautiful’:

“They say heaven is nice with its angels / I say that nice is the juice of grape / take this which is
present and forget about what is promised / because hearing the drums is only nice from far away” (my translation).

In fact, rather than a religious attribute, there seems to be a level of spirituality, of bewilderment and question, associated with these absences. In his review on the film, Michael J. Anderson focuses on some of these ‘absent-present’ spaces beyond the visual field, and sees them in the service of the director’s strategy of depicting “presence without [material] presence, a concept essential in order to understand the film in terms of the spiritual” (Anderson). Therefore, meta-silence gives way to a metaphysical contemplation as a result of one’s trans-sensorial perception of the world. This is a silence as presence, then, rather than an absence, and a space for meditation, rather than negligence.

4.6 Narrative Silence

When we tell a story, we tell but one story, and each member of the audience, with a peculiar capacity to imagine things, hears but one story. But when we say nothing, it’s as if we said a great number of things. André Gide said that the gaze is what’s important, not the subject matter. And Godard says that what’s one the screen is already dead- the spectator’s gaze breathes life into it.

(Kiarostami qtd in Nancy, Evidence 84, emphasis is in the original text)

Narrative meta-silence is basically either a deviation from the main narrative of the film, or a refrainment from providing information about any constituent of the diegesis whose presence would change either the construction of the narrative or the viewer’s recognition of the film, but whose absence does not change anything other than raising questions about itself. Maybe
more than anything else, this aspect of the Art Cinema in general, and that of Kiarostami in particular has been studied and written on. Here, I will address and exemplify both of these definitions of narrative silence through the writings of Laura Mulvey and Jean-Luc Nancy.

4.6.1 Silence as/against Death: Narrative Silence and Laura Mulvey

The first mode of narrative silence in Kiarostami’s cinema happens whenever the linear progression of the story is dismissed in favour of a micro-narrative (most of the encounters in And Life Goes on...), an eye-catching view (the rolling apple and the floating bone in The Wind Will Carry Us), or a marginal sound (the can being kicked and rolled down the alley in Close-Up). Forgetting the object of focus and following a minor detail, other than functional ramifications in the form of storytelling itself, has some philosophical implications about time, closure, and the relation between the centre and margin.

In her seventh chapter of Death 24x a Second, Laura Mulvey labels Kiarostami’s cinema as one based on an aesthetic of repetition and digression, full of intentional gaps that stall or deviate the forward movement of the narrative, and in short, a “cinema of uncertainty and delay.” Recalling Deleuze’s concept of time-image in the cinema following Italian Neo-realism, Mulvey sees the narrative silences in Kiarostami, first, as a play of the time past and present:

This cinema of record, observation, and delay tends to work with elongated shots, enabling the presence of time to appear on the screen. The duration of the shots draws attention to time as it passes on the screen, the film’s present, but the lack of
action confronts the audience with a palpable sense of cinematic time that leads back, from the time of screening, to the time of registration, the past.

(Mulvey, Death 129)

In addition, the halts and wanderings of cars as Kiarostami’s main narrative vehicles, and of the main characters as the required Deleuzian observers of the scene, result in “postponing or delaying the end” (129). This, to Mulvey, is reminder of Freud’s concept of *nachtraglichkeit* (deferred action), which “attempts to get away from an over-linear or over-determined concept of the human psyche, in favour of a possible revision of events through return, at a later date, out of which memories can find new significance” (141-42). Take the example of *And Life Goes On*...: A film about the quest of a filmmaker and his son to an earthquake-struck region in search of the actors of one of the director’s previous films. Mulvey points out that the delay (or narrative silence) here happens both thematically (mainly forced by the death drive) and aesthetically: it opens up alternative narrative opportunities, displaces the desire for the end (144), leads the film to a translation of the unavoidable, and to “representing an ultimate unspeakable, beyond conscious comprehension” (129). This is a silence, then, which is both referring to and resisting against death. This way, the temporal journey of the father and son with the goal of finding the two actors of *Where Is the Friend’s Home?* loses its centrality, and the marginal-commentaries on death and life (including that of a director who never lets us see the death of his film) take its place.
4.6.2 Silence as Evidence: Narrative Silence and Jean-Luc Nancy

If the keyword in the first mode of narrative silence is digression, the keyword for the second mode is refrainment. We saw in the first chapter that how silence, in a pragmatic framework, can mean a refrainment from speaking yet be completely communicative. This refrainment from providing information about some aspects of the diegesis should not be confused with the omission of an aspect. As noted earlier, the diegetic element can be considered silenced only when its absence does not change the course of the plot, but is felt and raises questions.

Therefore, the transfiguration of the protagonist of David Lynch’s *Lost Highway* (1997), for example, could not be seen as a narrative silence. In Kiarostami, the silenced element is either a preceding cause for the character’s present-time actions, or an ensuing result of the character’s actions. The ambiguous and ‘unfinished’ ending of *Through the Olive Trees* is an example of the latter, and the unknown reason of Mr. Badii for wanting to kill himself in *Taste of Cherry* is an example of the former. In fact, we do not know much about Mr. Badii’s history, or even the reason why he needs somebody to bury him. Kiarostami’s explanation that “I haven’t told his story, in order to avoid any emotional links with the audience,” (qtd in Elena 125) again insists on the silent essence of this choice. To Jean-Luc Nancy, though, the whole matter is justified through his own notion of the *evidence* of film.

In a monograph written on *And Life Goes on…*, Nancy introduces Kiarostami’s cinema as one based on ‘evidence’, where instead of being impregnated with infinite unconscious implications, “presents itself at the right distance, or else, that in front of which one finds the right distance, the proximity that lets the relation take place, and that opens to continuity”
(Nancy, *Evidence* 70). For Nancy this distance is a *distance juste*, a just distance and a matter of justice, which holds true both for the image and the sound. All the holes, dead moments, or silences could also be viewed from this perspective: we are not to perceive what we are not given, so instead of searching for something beyond access by documenting the reality, sometimes it is better to appreciate “something more than a truth: an existence” (Nancy, *Evidence* 44).

Evidence of the cinema becomes possible only through its own opposite moments. Nancy argues that, “Evidence always comprises a blind spot within its very obviousness: in this way it leans on the eye. The “blind spot” does not deprive the eye of its sight: on the contrary, it makes an opening for a gaze and it *presses* upon it to look” (12). In fact, without the blind spots, the evidence will not be evident. These blind spots (which Nancy and Kiarostami call holes in their conversation in the end of the book) are those silenced moments of the narrative which allow for a “metaphysical meditation”: “But this does not mean a cinema treating of metaphysical themes (…) it means cinematic metaphysics, cinema as the place of meditation” (44). Narrative silence, then, whether in the form of constant digressions through a never-ending journey or in the shape of divergent absences that provide the just distance for witnessing, becomes a ‘sonorous space’ for the audience to listen (*écoute*), in the sense that Nancy maintains in his *Listening* (detailed in chapter 2). The cinema of narrative silence is one in which the audience is placed in the position of the philosopher: one who listens to oneself while hearing (and witnessing) the life (or the film) from a just distance.
4.7 Political Silence

It’s true that I know myself as an apolitical filmmaker. If by political film, you mean a propagandistic film that a political group makes to smash its rival, I will never make a political film. But political film is in fact a film which does not seem political at all. It is not tense, does not shout slogans, and makes its mark in the long run.

(Kiarostami qtd in Tabe‘Mohammadi 44)

Not only has Kiarostami himself numerously tried to label his cinema apolitical, but this trait, as a negative quality, has continuously come under censure from the Iranian intellectual circles that condemn this “centrifugal post-modern” approach as being “neutral and conservative” (Eslami and Farhadpour 53-85). On the other hand, in at least two ways his cinema has been subject to political readings by exiled Iranian film researchers. In The Politics of Iranian Cinema, Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad argues that more than a structural concept, the political status of a film in Iran is determined by its reception among the government officials and a highly politicized society: “not only do the authorities treat many ‘social films’ politically, but also the reception of the films shows that they are interpreted in political terms as well” (150). The ban on many Kiarostami’s features (Homework for three years, The Wind Will Carry Us and Ten up until now) and the fact that he is not able (or willing) to make more films in his own country are evidences for the first half, and various political ‘readings’ of his films, especially among the diaspora of Iranian critics and artists all around the world is an attestation to the second half of Zedabadi-Nejad’s statement. See for example the fan-dedicated video clip made for a political song by Kiosk music band that uses scenes of Taste of Cherry and the post-electoral uprising of 2009 as the visual accompaniment to lyrics about frustration from the “blindness and ignorance and universal crisis” (Ay Ay 2).
According to Hamid Dabashi, a professor at the Columbia University, “Kiarostami’s cinema has always been the furthest from the political, and yet it remains ‘political’ in the most subversive sense of the term” (Dabashi, Close Up 62). In fact, Dabashi’s following statement that “whether intentionally or not, his cinema is actively engaged in teasing out the hidden assumptions underlying the constitution of the Iranian subject” (Dabashi, Close Up 62), proves that he is more inclined to attribute his own post-colonial theories to his subject of study, rather than extracting them from the films themselves. That is why his socio-politically circumscribed analyses find ironic commentaries in Kiarostami up until Taste of Cherry, and why he gets so disappointed with The Wind Will Carry Us that calls it “the nightmarish negation of every film he ever made” (254). Dabashi’s extremism reaches a degree that he finds the cowshed sequence as “one of the most violent rape scenes in all cinema” (254), while all that happens in this famous subterranean scene is the reciting of the titular poem of the film by the male protagonist for his acquaintance’s fiancée while she is milking a cow. Could these radical ascriptions be a result of the various silences in the structure of Kiarostami’s films?

However, Dabashi is not entirely wrong about a period of political awareness in Kiarostami. As we saw in the case of The Chorus, he has not always turned a blind eye to the ever-changing political sphere of Iran. If from one view, even the act of not commenting on the politics can be a political act, there is a specific period in Kiarostami’s work, from 1979 to 1984, when his films are more explicitly impregnated with political implications. The cycle starts with First Case, Second Case (1979), a documentary in the first year after Iranian revolution with the presence of some of the government officials at the time; continues with a seemingly harmless short film and then a documentary about the necessity to obey the laws and rules (respectively, Orderly
or Disorderly (1981) and Fellow Citizens (1984)), peaks with The Chorus (1982), and ends with the beginning of his ‘fake documentary’ period in The First Graders (1984), into which “some critics [such as Dabashi] read a strongly political message” (Elena 61).

The discussion about the political or apolitical essence of Kiarostami can be extended to another full chapter, but here we should trace the representations of political silence, as an intentional and meaningful avoidance, in his cinema. I am more inclined to the readings of Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa (professor at the Columbia College in Chicago) and Negar Mottahedeh (associate professor at the Duke University) in this regard, that not only as film researchers, but also as Iranian women outside the country seem to truly understand the mechanism of politics in Iran and its tight connection to a fundamentalist interpretation of religion. Saeed-Vafa argues that in Kiarostami’s films, both before and after the revolution, the city is always filled with corruption, unemployment, poverty, and lies, which has a lot to say about Iranian socio-political circumstances. Avoidance from explicit comments in such a context finds a special meaning as a political silence. Furthermore, Saeed-Vafa adds that, “we might say that there is political significance in that in most of Kiarostami’s films – especially Close-Up, Taste of Cherry, and The Wind Will Carry Us – the characters are defined through their jobs” (Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum 66). But maybe the most subtle output of politics in the cinema of Kiarostami is the absence of women in many of his early films, and then their controversial representation in his future films. Saeed-Vafa notes that, “by itself, the idea of absent women is not so significant, except in reference to the censorship that limits the situations in which women can be portrayed in film” (68).
According to Iran’s Islamic laws after the revolution, women must always be seen with *hejab*, which means covering their bodies and hair from the gaze of men. As it is the rule in exteriors, nobody questions why the women in films are wearing *hejab*. But a few directors have avoided depicting *hejab*, or in fact women, indoors, as a violator of life’s reality. That is why some critics consider the very act of not showing women in the scenes interior a very loud political gesture. In *Displaced Allegories*, Negar Motahehdeh claims that in the highly political context of the post-revolutionary years in Iran, “Kiarostami’s films distinguish themselves by absenting women from the screen during major scenes, only to remind us of that absence by recovering a cloud of them in minor scenes” (99). In other words, by using the government’s restrictions on depicting women and the relation between man and woman, Kiarostami makes a cinematic choice of silencing some voices and images to make “displaced allegories of the conditions of film industry itself” (Mottahehdeh 103). This choice also leads to an escape from city to nature, and from openly political debates to a meaningful absence. Before the ban on *The Wind Will Carry Us*, Kiarostami had managed to get away with censorship in this manner (“A movie is good, I think, when the censor does not understand what should be censored”) (Kiarostami qtd in Fischer 242), But with the tightening of pressure in the country (increased censorship, more total bans, suspending the work of some directors such as Jafar Panahi - an ex-assistant of Kiarostami - and the migration of many filmmakers including the Makhmalbafs, Bahman Gobadi (another ex-assistant of Kiarostami), and even the veteran Bahram Beizai), Kiarostami reacted first with a strategy of making women the main subject and protagonist of his films (in *Ten* and *Shirin*), and finally leaving the country to make films whose main theme is the relationship between man and woman.
4.8 Conclusion: The Diagram of Non-Acoustic Silences and the Case of Shirin

In the same way as acoustic silences, there could be drawn a diagram of non-acoustic silences in the cinema of Kiarostami, which again gives us a panoramic view of the matrix of his cinematic meta-silences. I have to remind the reader, though, that unlike the acoustic silences, this diagram is more case-specific; that is, it is possible to find other kinds of meta-silence or different branches for each category in the cinema in general.

![Diagram of Non-Acoustic Silences in Kiarostami's Cinema](image)

Kiarostami’s 2008 *Shirin* is an exceptional combination of almost all the silences I have listed so far. In this radical cinematic experience, more than a hundred Iranian actresses plus Juliette Binoche and very few shadowed men in the background are sitting in a movie theatre, watching a film based on the pre-Islamic tragic story of Shirin, an Armenian princess who was caught in a love triangle between Iran’s king, Khosrow, and a common stone carver, Farhad. Kiarostami’s
camera, however, only shows us the faces of the audience and the reflection of the flashes of images on them, and we ‘hear the film’, with all its musical pieces and dialogues and sound effects. We even hear the sounds of a war, for example, as in a radio drama, with the difference that here we are privileged to watch some beautiful faces at the same time. A double voyeurism is at work in watching Shirin: we stare at the people who are staring at other people, but are used to be stared at too.

In a complete separation of what we see from what we hear, we might even conclude that we are audio-viewing two different films. All that we see is acoustically silent; that is, the soundtrack of the visual film is completely silenced. But from another viewpoint, the visual contains a partial silence covered by the sounds and music the actors/viewers supposedly hear. None of these visible actors utter a word or make a sound. No dialogue (character/dialogue silence), and no language (language silence). If you are unfamiliar with Iranian cinema you will not probably even notice that these people are all famous actresses, and if you are familiar, a game of remembering more than a hundred names begins. There is no narrative attached to them, and the only thing present is the image, the faces.

On the other hand, in the film that we hear, the character/images and all the visuals are completely silenced. Although one might argue that there are some synchronized moments between the sonic narrative film and the visual non-narrative one, as Chion has demonstrated, “the spontaneous and irresistible” synthesis out of the concurrent join of “a particular auditory phenomenon and visual phenomenon,” “results independently of any rational logic” (Chion, Audio-Vision 63). This process of “synchrones” (a term coined by Chion) makes us attribute the
role of ‘action’ to the sound and ‘reaction’ to the image. Therefore, we make a connection between the female voice-deprived bodies and the female body-deprived voices.

The soundtrack begins with an epic instrumental piece, and then we hear Shirin’s voice, over the wailings of her ladies-in-waiting, announcing to her “sisters” that she is going to tell her side of the story. For us, the ‘sisters’ image would ultimately be shifted to the female viewers who burst into crying, almost at the same moments that Shirin’s waiting maids do. This synchresis reaches its climax by the end of the film, when Shirin finally finishes her narrative by saying, “And now we are here: I, Khosrow, and you my mournful sisters... You are looking at Khosrow’s body and crying. You are listening to my story and crying. And I am staring into your eyes from behind the curtain of tears. Are these tears for me, Shirin? Or for the Shirin hidden in each of you?”

However, maybe it is the impossibility of self-revealing that connects the tears of the visible actors and the crying voices, for the truth is the women we see are not watching or even hearing that film! As Hamideh Razavi’s behind-the-scenes film, *Taste of Shirin* (2008), shows, the actors are filmed in small groups of two and three, not seeing anything but a simple drawing on a white cardboard (picture 14), and not hearing anything but Kiarostami’s voice occasionally directing their eyes or emotive gestures, and mostly asking them to remember an old romantic relationship of their own and show it in their eyes. This is a silence, in yet another level: the silence of the actors, or the actors who are made to act like non-actors. Once again, by the creative use of various silences, and through a strategy much like Kuleshov’s montage experiments, Kiarostami makes a ‘false documentary’; this time, a deceiving collection of unrelated sounds and images which are only connected together in the minds of the audience.
But this aesthetic experiment can also be regarded as a political statement in another type of meta-silence. All the women in the film, including the French Binoche, are forced to wear veils while hearing a very corporeal love story in stark contrast with their own silenced images. When the film was finally released inside Iran - more than four years after its production and as the only feature by Kiarostami screened in his home country after 1997 - a critic of *Film* magazine stated that it “is a work against the bans without a cause or the famous censorship” (TalebiNejad). In fact, the completely detached female voices and bodies in the film are both separately veiled: the bodies are covered in mandatory long gowns and scarves, and the voices are covered in an official and literary prose and sometimes even verses (of Nizami Ganjavi, the
12th century bard and the versifier of *Khosrow and Shirin*, far from the colloquial Farsi that the actor/viewers speak in.

In a way, the whole *Shirin* is an extension of the subterranean scene in *The Wind Will Carry US*. That film was banned in Iran, according to Kiarostami, because of his refusal to delete the Khayyám’s poems and that particular scene from the film, though in the second case, “it wasn’t the poetry of Forough [the famous Iranian contemporary poet whose poem is recited in this scene] with which they had problems, it was the sequence- they claimed it was pornography” (*A Taste of my Cinema* 88). The similarities between that scene and *Shirin* are not negligible, for in the latter we also have women sitting in a semi-dark underground listening to the poetry (of Nizami), to a most romantic love story far from their reality and yet close to their life experience. Not only these women cannot intervene in the sequence of events in that story, but they are forbidden from playing the roles on the screen both because of the politics of the country, and the authority of the director. Therefore, the many powers of silence do not allow these actors/viewers to react in any other way than shedding tears. The silence will also carry us, the viewers of these viewers, to the uncanny realms of emotive contemplation.
Conclusion: The Many Powers of Silence

Picture 19. “The Tortoise and the Two Ducks,” a fable from Kalilah wa Dimna
(Image taken from Musée Jean De La Fontaine, as the story is re-appeared in de La Fontaine’s fables)
(“The Tortoise and the Two Ducks”)

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Ethical and Transcendental

There is a fable in *Kalīlah wa Dimnah* (the 12th century Farsi translation of the Indian *Panchatantra*) about a tortoise who wanted to join his two duck friends emigrating from their draining pond. The ducks prepared a piece of wood and the three of them took it by their beaks and went up into the sky. The condition for this journey was of course the silence of the tortoise; a condition that the impatient reptile did not manage to fulfil: he talked, and he died.

The potential of silence in keeping a creature alive in this allegorical example might be in contrast to the usual association of silence with death. In his article, ‘I Hear You with My Eyes’, Slavoj Žižek stresses the vivifying power of voice as an object. He writes, “Ultimately, we hear things because we cannot see everything” (93). But Žižek, relying on Derrida, does not grant the same status for the opposite, because of the mortifying power of the gaze: “Hearing with our eyes (...) is (...) to see the absolute silence that marks the suspension of life” (94). Therefore, in a more Lacanian framework, silence might refer to the Other. And the voices and sounds *qua* objects, “provide the ground that renders visible the figure of silence” (Žižek 93). This is a silence that points to the invisible and the unspeakable, and is the only way to make them imaginable, but only at an individual level, both for the creator/filmmaker and the creator/audience.

Silence as life and silence as death are both renditions of an archetypical thought that relates silence to metaphysics. In the cinema, this relation becomes more significant in the invisible connection of the director to the audience. And in the works of directors such as Abbas Kiarostami, a paradoxical notion is also added to this already complicated equation: he is aware
of sitting in God’s position, but wants to share the throne with the viewer. He admits that, “If you’re a filmmaker or a photographer, you’re doing people a favour and at the same time you’re betraying them. We’re almost in God’s place: picking a few things and showing them off and not saying what’s being withheld” (Nancy, Evidence 90). The concept of inter-active cinema is a reaction to this inequality, trying to compensate for it by empowering the audience through a number of devices, including silence.

As we saw in the last two chapters, by employing acoustic silences, Kiarostami tries to activate the “auditory imagination” of the viewer (which according to Don Ihde is “the possibility of a synthesis of imagined and perceived sound as noted previously in a visual example” (62)), and through a Bressonian divorce of images and sounds and an extensive use of various kinds of meta-silence, he pushes the audience towards a trans-sensorial perception, a forced contemplation, and a possibility for participation. But this morally democratic option is, at the same time, forced onto the audience. We are forced to think, and we are forced to choose. In fact, this silence-dependent cinema, despite aiming to produce more participatory opportunities for its audio-viewers, has been essentially dictated and forced by the director. A forced democracy, then, which leads to a humanistic transcendence where the viewer is elevated to the role of a thinker, a philosopher in Nancy’s definition, and a god who is silent, but also can hear (or sense) everything. As Murray Schafer maintains in “Open Ears,” the opening of the audience’s “ear of the imagination” connects them again to “the notion of God as an omniscient microphone, hearing or overhearing everything” (26). Silence leaves much to the imagination, but here is where the humanistic transcendence begins. After all, in the
beginning, there was nothing! And this very simple truth, beyond being frightful or divine, is the gravity of a void that Kiarostami’s selected audience has no choice but to fill up, or escape from.

Poetic and Philosophical

As a unifying narrative strategy that forces the audience to participate in the process of creation, and as a meaningful avoidance of directly commenting on the socio-political forces both in the diegesis and in the non-diegetic world, silence inevitably assumes some aesthetic and philosophical dimensions too. At the core of Kiarostami’s cinema lies a deep existentialist notion that shows itself through the idea of lack as an existential presence, a search for unattainable answers, and the bewilderment of characters facing the absence or the finitude of life and love. However, unlike the more politically charged notions of existential anguish, to Kiarostami the very powerful presence of silence makes no other choice possible than consent, as in the proverb, “silence is a sign of consent.” The omnipresent divine silence, then, in Kiarostami’s films, provides a humanistic silence as a space for the (re)birth of questions, with the inevitable resort of consent.

This is reminiscent of the medieval Persian semi-mystic notion of Nazar o Gozar (witnessing and passing), best exemplified in the fancy-free quatrains of Omar Khayyám, such as this one: “You who are burning from the spiritual world / puzzled by the five [senses] and four [elements] and six [directions] and seven [stars] / drink wine since you don’t know where you’ve come from / take pleasure for you don’t know where you’re going to” (Khayyám 67, my translation). This world-view is of course more accentuated in those films of Kiarostami where death is a more
prominent theme, with the most obvious example of *The Wind will Carry Us*. *Le Monde*’s reviewer, Jean-Michel Frodon, calls this film a binary of “the visible and the hidden” inspired by Omar Khayyám and “his love for life and frustration with metaphysics” (Frodon 17-18). But the same weltanschauung is woven into all Kiarostami’s non-didactic films as well; films that suggest maybe instead of trying to find an impossible answer for the impossible dualities (life and death, fiction and reality) and enigmas (love, art, and the cinema), it is better to yield to a Khayyámesque pleasure-seeking and fancy-free philosophy. Forget the destination, enjoy the quest! But this quest becomes artistic only with the mediation of the aesthetics of silence.

Sontag’s description in this regard is invaluable:

> Silence is a strategy for the trans-valuation of art, art itself being the herald of an anticipated radical trans-valuation of human values. But the success of this strategy must mean its eventual abandonment, or at least its significant modification.

> Silence is a prophecy, one which the artist’s actions can be understood as attempting both to fulfill and to reverse.

> As language points to its own transcendence in silence, silence points to its own transcendence- to a speech beyond silence.

*(Sontag 18)*

This aesthetic equation, long before the advent of the cinema, has been dominant in poetry. Kiarostami himself admits that “the structure of my films *is* the structure of poetry...” (“A Taste of My Cinema” 85, emphasis in original), and he is not alone in this interpretation. Five of the fourteen papers presented at a 2005 conference on Kiarostami, held by the Iran Heritage Foundation in London, directly deal with either his poems and their relation with his cinema, or
the poetry in his films (*Abbas Kiarostami: Image, Voice, and Vision*). Noting the influence of poetry in the Iranian alternative cinema of the 1970s, Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa holds that, “When Iranian filmmakers apply the language and structure of poetry to their films, they arrive at a narrative that is compressed, sparse, and metaphoric” (Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum 58). To Saeed-Vafa, minimalism and non-linear metaphoric work is a result of this influence. Furthermore, in an essay titled, “An Alley Greener than the Dream of God,” Babak Ebrahimian notes that, ‘If every great filmmaker has a ‘secret’ behind his or her films, then Kiarostami’s secret lies in his careful multi-layering of images and soundtrack” (Ebrahimian 97). For Ebrahimian, Kiarostami’s secret is eventually incorporating poetry as a level of sound. But then again, one can talk about ‘poetic imagery’ without poetic words, and ‘poetic words’ without poetic imagery. The abundance of poems, poetry, poetic layering, and even references to Iran’s old and modern poets is as much tangible in Kiarostami’s cinema as his often nationally criticized detachment from politics. A poetic silence, then, filled with not only the unspoken, but the unspeakable.

Diagram 11. *The Powers of Silence in the Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*
Throughout the past two chapters, we saw that Kiarostami’s cinema is defined as minimalist, half-made, two-word, one-word, director-less, and also the cinema of the *metteur-en-scène* (by Kiarostami himself); based on ellipsis and omission (Saeed-Vafa), delay and uncertainty (Mulvey), evidence (Nancy), and displaced allegories (Mottahedeh); interactive (Rosenbaum), post-modern and conservative (Eslami and Farhadpour), and even beyond that, as the “Euro-Persian version of Road Movies,” as the last chapter of Devin Orgeron’s book, *Road Movies from Muybridge and Méliès to Lynch and Kiarostami* suggests. However, based on the categories and functions summarized in the diagrams 9, 10, and 11 of this thesis, it can be argued that Kiarostami’s is in fact a cinema of silences; both in form and in content, and both in structure and strategy.

**The Many Possibilities of Silence Studies in the Cinema**

We might be able to apply the analytical approach suggested in this thesis to the works of many other Art Cinema auteurs, and, by extension, to other cinematic modes, in order to extract the many kinds of communicative silences at work in film. This research does not claim that it is the only possible model for studying cinematic silences. Just like other areas of film studies, ‘silence studies’ can take different patterns as well, and whether in a structuralist framework or in combination with other approaches in analyzing films, can give us a better understanding of the functions, implications, and consequences of silence in the cinema. However, I believe that defining silence in pragmatic terms, finding the less developed parts of cinematic silence studies, and recognizing the variety of silences in the works of a notable figure of Art Cinema, is
a reliable template capable of extension to a modest yet necessary aspect of film studies. If linguistics has been somewhat successful in accomplishing this task, academic studies of arts, including the art of the cinema, can do it too. In the end, if nothing else, I hope that one significant conclusion of this research is effortlessly evident: We should not remain silent about silence.
Bibliography


<http://www.movieplayer.it/foto/abbas-kiarostami_4909/>.


Cicero. "Quote - Silence Is One of the Great Arts of Conversation... on Quotations Book."


## Appendix

A list of Kiarostami’s films until 2012. Please note that the films number 20, 23, and 24 are usually referred to as ‘The Koker Trilogy’ among critics, and also in this thesis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>International Title (Release Year)</th>
<th>Original Title</th>
<th>Length</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The Bread and Alley (1970)</td>
<td>Nan o Koucheh (or Nan va Koucheh)</td>
<td>11 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Recess (or Breaktime) (1972)</td>
<td>Zang-e Tafrih</td>
<td>14 minutes</td>
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<td>3. The Experience (1973)</td>
<td>Tajrobeh</td>
<td>53 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Traveller (1974)</td>
<td>Mosafe</td>
<td>69 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. So Can I (1975)</td>
<td>Man ham Mitounam</td>
<td>4 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Two Solutions for One Problem</td>
<td>Do Rah-e Hale baraye Yek Mas'aleh</td>
<td>4 minutes</td>
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<td>8. The Colours (1976)</td>
<td>Rangha</td>
<td>14 minutes</td>
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<td>9. A Suit for the Wedding (or The</td>
<td>Lebasi baraye Arousi</td>
<td>56 minutes</td>
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<td>Wedding Suit) (1976)</td>
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<td>11. Tribute to the Teachers (1977)</td>
<td>Bozorgdasht-e Mo'alleh</td>
<td>23 minutes</td>
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<td>12. How to Make Use of Our Leisure</td>
<td>Az Oghat-e Faraghat-e Khod Chegounah</td>
<td>7 minutes</td>
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<td>Time (1977)</td>
<td>Estefadeh Konim</td>
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<td>15. Dental Hygiene (or Toothache)</td>
<td>Behdasht-e Dandar (or Dandar-Dandar)</td>
<td>23 minutes</td>
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<td>16. Orderly or Disorderly (1981)</td>
<td>Be Tarlib ya Bedoun-e Tarlib</td>
<td>17 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>17. The Chorus (1982)</td>
<td>Hamsorayan (or Hamsorayan)</td>
<td>16 minutes</td>
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<td>18. Fellow Citizen (1983)</td>
<td>Hamshahri</td>
<td>46 minutes</td>
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<td>20. Where is the Friend's Home?</td>
<td>Khane-ye Doust Kojast?</td>
<td>79 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>23. Life and Nothing More...</td>
<td>Zendegi va Digar Mosh... (or Va Zendegi Edameh Darad...)</td>
<td>91 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>(or And Life Goes on...) (1992)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>24. Through the Olive Trees (or</td>
<td>Zir-e Derakhsh-e Zeitoun</td>
<td>99 minutes</td>
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<td>Under the Olive Trees) (1994)</td>
<td></td>
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<td>25. À propos de Nice, la suite</td>
<td>À propos de Nice, la suite (segment Repérages)</td>
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<tr>
<td>(segment Repérages) (1995)</td>
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<td>27. Taste of Cherry (or A Taste of</td>
<td>Ta'm-e Gilas</td>
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<td>Cherry) (1997)</td>
<td></td>
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<td>28. The Wind Will Carry Us</td>
<td>Bad Ma Ra Khahad Bord</td>
<td>113 minutes</td>
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<td>29. ABC Africa (2000)</td>
<td>ABC Africa</td>
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<td>31. Five (or Five: Dedicated to Ozu) (2003)</td>
<td>Panj</td>
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<td>32. Making of Five (5 on Five)</td>
<td>Saktan-e Panj (5 Rouye Panj)</td>
<td>51 minutes</td>
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<td>33. 10 on Ten (2004)</td>
<td>10 Rouye Dah</td>
<td>83 minutes</td>
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<td>34. Tickets: Segment Two (2005)</td>
<td>Tickets: Segment Two</td>
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<tr>
<td>35. Roads (or Roads of Kiarostami) (2006)</td>
<td>Rah-ha</td>
<td>32 minutes</td>
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<td>36. Persian Rug (segment Where is</td>
<td>Kojast Jaye Residan (az Majmu’eye Farsh-e Irani)</td>
<td>32 minutes</td>
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<td>the Reaching Place) (2007)</td>
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<td>37. To Each His Own Cinema (segment Where Is My Romeo) (2007)</td>
<td>To Each His Own Cinema (segment Where Is My Romeo)</td>
<td>3 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38. Shirin (2008)</td>
<td>Shirin</td>
<td>91 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>41. No (2010)</td>
<td>Non</td>
<td>9 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>42. Like Someone in Love (2012)</td>
<td>Like Someone in Love</td>
<td>109 minutes</td>
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